

Interpreting the Harmony of Reality:
Jonathan Edwards' Theology of Revelation

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To my *fidelia*. With love and joy.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed by me, that it represents my own research, and that it has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

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Abstract

This thesis is believed to be the first full-scale study of Jonathan Edwards' theology of revelation. The interrelated questions addressed in this work are 'what was Edwards' understanding of divine revelation,' and 'how did this understanding function in his larger theological project?' The first question is answered by showing how Edwards' theology of revelation flowed from a doctrine of the Trinity that featured the divine attribute of communicativeness, and from a doctrine of creation that theorised God created in order to communicate himself to intelligent beings noetically, affectionally and beatifically. Edwards' theology of revelation was thus distinctively tri-dimensional in that Trinitarian communication contained noetic, affectional and beatific elements. This revelation encompassed the media of Scripture, nature and redemptive history, and Edwards' understandings of each of these three media are explored in depth. The concept of harmony is shown to be key to Edwards' use of all of these media. Edwards' radical opposition to Deistic thinking, in which the media of revelation are alleged to be discordant, grounds the discussion in its eighteenth century context.

The second of the questions posed above is answered by presenting a theory explaining Edwards' great project as the pursuit of one objective: to interpret all reality as the harmonious self-revelation of the Triune God, so that human beings might better fulfil their purpose to apprehend and re-emanate this revelation. We believe that this is a plausible and useful way to understand Edwards' entire corpus.

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Introduction

I. Background and Scope of Study

For many years, it has been more or less the custom to begin studies on Jonathan Edwards with remarks about the amazing profusion of scholarship in this field, along with some attempt to explain it. The field, or ‘vineyard’ as it is known, remains incredibly active today, and such statements are still being made.¹ However, with the completion this year of the most comprehensive primary works project in American history—the Yale Edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*²—and the recent publication of *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards* and *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* in addition to the continued proliferation of ever more specialised studies and reinterpretations, perhaps it is time now to talk about Edwards not as a phenomenon in need of explanation but as a permanent fixture in the academic landscape.³ His students have at last succeeded in establishing him not merely as America’s pre-eminent theologian, but as one of the world’s great thinkers. Edwards thus belatedly takes his place in the company of perpetually important figures, wherein no feature of his thought is without some merit for serious study.

Indeed, although a fuller recognition of this status may be more recent, Edwards scholars have been proceeding as if it were true since Perry Miller, and a search of the thousands of books, dissertations, essays and articles will indicate that there are precious few areas that have received no treatment whatsoever.⁴ So for the present generation, the question of direction is no longer simply ‘what has not been done?’ The considerations are now ‘what is underdeveloped and in need of sustained investigation?’, ‘what is fragmentary and in need of synthesis?’ and ‘which existing theories are in need of revision?’

¹ See, for example, Harry S. Stout, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Caleb J. D. Maskell, eds., *Jonathan Edwards at 300* (Lanham, MD and Oxford: University Press of America, 2005), pp. v-ix.

² References to *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1957-2008) are identified in the notes by *Works Vol.* . . . See the bibliography for the identity of the editor(s), full title and specific publication date of individual volumes.

³ Sang Hyun Lee, ed., *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005); Stephen J. Stein, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴ M. X. Lesser cited roughly 3,000 in 1994. See Lesser, *Jonathan Edwards: An Annotated Bibliography, 1979-1993* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994).

This newer set of considerations led to a study of Edwards' theology of revelation. More precisely, the interrelated questions addressed in this work are 'what was Edwards' understanding of divine revelation,' and 'how did this understanding function in his larger theological project?' We intend to show that Edwards' theology of revelation flowed from a doctrine of the Trinity featuring the divine attribute of communicativeness, and from a doctrine of creation as God's continual self-communication to intelligent beings noetically, affectionally and beatifically through the media of Scripture, nature and redemptive history. Edwards' larger theological project was thus to interpret all reality as the harmonious self-revelation of the triune God, so that human beings might better fulfil their teleological purpose to apprehend and re-emanate actively this revelation.

II. Situation of Study

As an exercise in historical theology, this dissertation stands in continuity with cognate studies in other major Reformed theologians. In the middle of the last century, John Calvin's doctrine of revelation or the knowledge of God was the subject of numerous works by notable scholars. This interest in Calvin's thought on the matter was prompted in part by the Barth-Brunner controversy, and both protagonists' doctrines of revelation were likewise examined during this time. Among these studies, Hans Frei's Yale dissertation 'The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth' serves as a loose conceptual model for this project, in that it locates revelation at the very core of Barth's distinctive project.⁵ Frei's own influential thought on revelation has now become the subject of critical exposition, and he is not alone.⁶ The level of interest in this locus undoubtedly parallels the ongoing vital importance it holds for the church generally and for Reformed theology in particular. Edwards, who was the first to construct a systematic theology in direct response to the very same Enlightenment project that lives on to animate debate even today, would seem to be an obvious candidate for exploration on this topic. However, while his innovative yet orthodox contributions in many other loci have been treated in the ongoing torrent of Edwards scholarship, a dedicated study on revelation has remained a *desideratum*.

⁵ Hans W. Frei, 'The Doctrine of Revelation in the Thought of Karl Barth, 1909 to 1922: The Nature of Barth's Break with Liberalism' (PhD diss., Yale University, 1956).

⁶ See, for example, David E. Demson, *Hans Frei & Karl Barth: Different Ways of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1997) and Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History: Hans W. Frei's Public Theology* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2004).

The nature of this project brings it into conversation with Edwards scholarship of two distinct, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, categories: work exploring aspects of his theology connected with revelation and work proposing an overarching theory on Edwards. Although revelation as a comprehensive unit has not been done, this project builds upon a spectrum of existing work in neighbouring areas. To name some of figures here, Stephen J. Stein has been a persistent voice calling for more systematic studies of Edwards' thought on Scripture while providing the basis for such studies as the editor of *Apocalyptic Writings*, *Notes on Scripture*, and the *Blank Bible*.⁷ Robert E. Brown's monograph *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* uncovered an Edwards who was vitally interested in grappling with the claims of nascent biblical criticism.⁸ Because he focussed only on portions of Edwards' doctrine of Scripture, however, Brown has recently called for a 'grand synthetic treatment' of the subject.⁹ Edwards' theology of history, including its revelatory aspects, was the main focus of Avihu Zakai's 2003 *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment*.¹⁰ There have been a number of articles dealing with aspects of Edwards' thought on nature, including those of Zakai, Clyde Holbrook, Conrad Cherry, Paula M. Cooley, Diana Butler, Sang Hyun Lee, and Janice Knight.¹¹ Perhaps most closely related would be Gerald McDermott's work on Deism, which dealt heavily although in some ways tangentially with relevant topics, and he likewise would look for a systematic treatment of revelation.¹²

⁷ See Stein, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vols. 5, 15 and 24*.

⁸ Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

⁹ Brown, 'Jonathan Edwards and the Bible' in Sang Hyun Lee, ed., *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹¹ See Zakai, 'Jonathan Edwards and the Language of Nature: The Re-Enchantment of the World in the Age of Scientific Reasoning,' *Journal of Religious History* 26, no. 1 (2002), pp. 15-41; Clyde A. Holbrook, *Jonathan Edwards: The Valley and Nature: An Interpretative Essay* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1987); Conrad Cherry, *Nature and the Religious Imagination: From Edwards to Bushnell*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); Paula M. Cooley, *Jonathan Edwards on Nature and Destiny: A Systematic Analysis* (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1985); Diana Butler, 'God's Visible Glory: The Beauty of Nature in the Thought of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards,' *Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 (1990), pp. 13-26; Sang Hyun Lee, 'Jonathan Edwards on Nature,' in Lee, W. Proudfoot and A. Blackwell, eds., *Faithful Imagining: Essays in Honor of Richard R. Niebuhr* (Scholars Press, 1995) pp. 39-59; and Janice Knight, 'Learning the Language of God: Jonathan Edwards and the Typology of Nature,' *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991), pp. 531-51.

¹² See Gerald R. McDermott, 'The Deist Connection: Jonathan Edwards and Islam' in Stephen J. Stein, ed., *Jonathan Edwards's Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 39-51; McDermott, 'Jonathan Edwards, Deism, and the Mystery of

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it is perhaps enough to indicate that study involving Edwards' thought on revelation is active but somewhat lacking in consolidation or higher-level synthesis. Our objective is thus to learn from the many useful studies that have already been done with a view towards piecing together Edwards' overall theology of revelation. Although less ambitious synthetic work in areas such as Scripture or nature would no doubt afford more detail and perhaps less risk, we have become convinced that some of the most significant features of Edwards' thought on revelation would be lost in anything less than an all-encompassing study.

In the course of this work, it became apparent that the category of revelation loomed very large for Edwards, to the extent that it seems preferable to speak of a *theology* of revelation instead of a discrete doctrine, and indeed, that it becomes possible to explain his entire project in terms of it. Why might the issue of revelation have been so very important for him? The answer perhaps lies with Edwards' situation in history. Edwards lived during the Enlightenment, and saw himself as a minister responding to the great challenges posed to the church by this movement. For an age in which the Scriptures were increasingly being conceived of as internally incoherent and irreconcilable with the data available from science, philosophy and history, Edwards argued for the radical opposite: all of reality is the harmonious communication of the Triune divine mind. Thus Scripture is in harmony with itself, with nature and with history. All three of Edwards' proposed grand projects, it seems, were designed to demonstrate precisely these things.¹³

As an attempt to explain Edwards' larger project, this thesis necessarily stands within a tradition of previous explanations. Perry Miller, the Harvard professor of literature who began the modern Edwards revival in the late 1940s, saw Edwards as the enigmatic intellectual artist who single-handedly appreciated the momentous implications of Newton and Locke and for whom traditional theology was merely a medium of expression.¹⁴ Conrad Cherry's *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal* was in some ways a critique of Miller, pointing out that

Revelation,' *Journal of Presbyterian History* 77, no. 4 (1999), pp. 211-24; McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and McDermott, personal communication of July 2006.

¹³ These three projects are known as the 'Rational Account,' the 'History of the Work of Redemption' and the 'Harmony of the Old and New Testament.' See the discussion in chapter 6, below.

¹⁴ See Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloan Associates, 1949.)

conventional Puritan doctrines such as faith and the covenant were central for Edwards.¹⁵ Roland A. Delattre's *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards* revealed the centrality of theological aesthetics in Edwards' thought.¹⁶ The year 1988 saw the arrival of two new directions for Edwards study. San Hyun Lee's *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* proposed Edwards' radical philosophical innovation to be a 'dispositional ontology.'¹⁷ The same year Robert Jenson's *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* recaptured Miller's sense of the breathtaking scope of Edwards' thought and its larger intellectual historical context while maintaining contact with theological accuracy. Gerald R. McDermott produced a series of publications in the late 1990s looking at Edwards as an ardent campaigner against Deism.¹⁸ Stephen R. Holmes' *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, benefiting from Jenson's foundation, demonstrated that Edwards' theology was essentially an extended exposition of God's infinite glory.¹⁹ Amy Plantinga Pauw picked up another thread by explaining Edwards' theology as distinctively Trinitarian.²⁰ Stephen J. Nichols proposed a larger anti-Enlightenment apologetic agenda for Edwards' project.²¹ This list is of course only the barest of sketches of the quest to find the 'elusive center' of Edwards' thought.²² The present work owes much to these and other previous studies.

III. Assumptions, Approach and Sources

My assumptions for this study begin with the fact that Edwards never published a full statement on his theology of revelation *per se*. Items such as *The*

¹⁵ Cherry, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards: A Reappraisal*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966).

¹⁶ Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968).

¹⁷ Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

¹⁸ See above, p. 3 n. 5 for McDermott's relevant publications.

¹⁹ Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

²⁰ Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002).

²¹ Nichols, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003).

²² Nichols, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty*, p. 1. Original spelling of words such as 'centre' shall be retained in quotations from American sources throughout.

End for Which God Created the World and ‘Miscellany’ 777 come close, but we nonetheless must draw from scattered sources that often occur in contexts other than dedicated systematic theology. Next, since Edwards’ thought in some other areas underwent development, we must allow for the possibility that his thought on revelation evolved over time.²³ As it turns out, development on this issue seems to have been more a matter of further elaboration and drawing out of implications than any change in direction, but this was not presumed. Finally, we assume the basic coherence of Edwards’ theology. This assumption is one that seems to be held at least tacitly by the majority of Edwards scholars. Amy Pauw has recently suggested that Edwards had a ‘high tolerance for theological tension,’ but she immediately undermines her remark by noting that her purported case in point is actually one of ‘complementary linguistic idioms’ rather than conflict.²⁴ Others have seen inconsistencies in Edwards at a deeper level—Peter Gay’s ‘tragedy’ of a mental giant trapped in the cage of Calvinist biblical theology comes to mind—but these perceptions tend to say more about the commentator’s own presuppositions than they do about Edwards.²⁵ The more plausible view is that Edwards, while willing to rest in mystery in a few intractable cases, was in fact highly sensitive to theological tension, and worked tirelessly if sometimes unsuccessfully to resolve it.²⁶ This characteristic opens up some possibility of reconstructing what he *might* have said on subjects not represented in his corpus. We need not go that far to ascertain Edwards’ basic views on revelation, however, since we have plenty of what he actually said on the topic; but this overall coherence is a prerequisite to doing the higher-level synthesis this project seeks to engage in.

My approach, then, will be to establish relevant portions of Edwards’ theology, to provide exegesis of explicit statements made on the subject of revelation and to extrapolate implicit principles, although not always in this order. In accord with Paul Ramsey’s dictum that ‘A student’s first effort must be to understand

²³ Examples of major shifts in Edwards are not plentiful. One would be Edwards’ theory of personal identity, in which he moved from a Lockean position at the beginning of his career to his theory of divine constitution many years later. See below, chapter 3 section VII.

²⁴ Amy Plantinga Pauw, *The Supreme Harmony of All: The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 11.

²⁵ Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 104. Gay’s presuppositions would seem to include that real intellectual achievement and submission to authoritative texts are incompatible pursuits.

²⁶ The best example of this tendency might be Edwards’ attempts at explaining *why* the perfectly good man Adam fell into sin. See Edwards, ‘Miscellanies’ 291, 436, 501 and 894.

Edwards *whole*, in the integrity of all parts of his writings on theological subjects,’ accomplishing this will necessarily involve forays into the full range of Edwards’ diverse corpus.²⁷ From these data, I will attempt to provide a description of Edwards’ theology of revelation as well as a theory on Edwards’ larger project set in relationship to this theology.

Since Edwards’ large body of work has been the subject of critical transcription and publication to a level unsurpassed among comparable authors, there have been few textual issues to cope with. My primary evidence consists mainly of the newly completed and readily available Yale Edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. In addition, I have made use of unpublished manuscript material gleaned from a visit to The Jonathan Edwards Center (JEC) at Yale Divinity School and from subsequent electronic correspondence with the JEC staff.

IV. Summary of Chapter Contents

Having discussed the background, rationale and methodology for this study, let us now sketch the contents of each chapter.

Chapter 1: Divine Communicativeness and Edwards’ Theology of Revelation

Edwards’ theology of divine revelation flows directly from his doctrines of the Trinity and creation. Partially in response to Deist critiques of the Trinity, Edwards formulated concepts that offered insight into the beautiful rationality of the Triune God. The most important of these is communicativeness, whereby Edwards argued that the universally held attribute of God’s goodness includes a disposition to share or ‘communicate’ his good state, calling for an eternal plurality in the divine being. In a similar manner, communicativeness furnished the answer to a theological problem that intrigued Edwards throughout his career: why did God create? His answer was that God created the world to communicate himself to intelligent beings. At a time when the Deists were arguing persuasively for the sufficiency of human reason to know God, the concept of communicativeness provided the basis for a highly robust and comprehensive theology of divine revelation. Edwards could appropriate every aspect of reality—nature and history as well as special revelation—as invested with revelatory content. Moreover, as a repetition *ad extra* of Trinitarian communicative activity, the content of revelation corresponds to the

²⁷ Ramsey, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 8*, p. 3.

content of the Trinity's own communication *ad intra*. Perhaps most determinative for the distinctive bent of Edwards' work, this correspondence means that revelation is necessarily correlative of the Trinity's own multi-dimensional communication, so that it consists of noetic, affectional and beatific components.

Chapter 2: The Harmony of Creation

Edwards' earliest intellectual pursuits were actually in science. Edwards marshalled the observation of, and the rational reflection on, nature to the service of glorifying God. Edwards' science is to be understood as in opposition to Hobbes' materialism and mechanistic interpretations of Newton. Integral to Edwards' later use of nature was his typological interpretation of natural phenomena. These 'types' were not merely illustrations, but contrivances made by God for the very purpose of pointing to their antitypes, such as Christ. Natural theology was very much a live issue for Edwards, since it was a centre-piece of the Deist agenda. Although nature could never stand alone as a sufficient guide as Tindal had argued, the joyful appropriation of nature by the regenerate is precisely the fulfilment of its purpose.

Chapter 3: The Necessity of Special Revelation

Given the apparently boundless possibilities Edwards would seem to grant to general revelation in nature, one might possibly wonder whether special revelation was indeed a requirement. However, as chapter 3 seeks to show, Edwards mounted a broad-spectrum body of arguments for the absolute necessity of special revelation. This apologetic, part of Edwards' campaign against hostile Enlightenment ideas, was developed in response not only to Deism but also to John Locke. Edwards' distinctive theology of revelation is illustrated by his innovative arguments built around divine communicativeness. In polar opposition to rationalist sensibilities, Edwards thought that even if exhaustive noetic information were available to humans, God would still communicate because he is a communicative being and made humans to engage in loving conversation with him.

Chapter 4: The Harmony of Scripture

In common with his theological inheritance, Edwards believed that the Scriptures shared the attributes of God. For Edwards, informed by his thoroughgoing Trinitarianism, the most significant of these attributes was its beautiful harmony. In an intellectual milieu bent on rebellion against the authority of this book as much as

against its author, interpreting its harmony was for Edwards the pre-eminent apologetic method as well as the best way to commune with his Lord. Other topics explored include Edwards' belief structure as distinguished from his apologetics, inspiration, canon, illumination, Locke's 'Fundamentalism' and Edwards' attitude to biblical criticism.

Chapter 5: The Harmony of History

History is an extraordinarily integral and pervasive category in Edwards' thought. Edwards understood history as one of the primary media through which God carries on his great project of self-communication. It is indeed the temporal vehicle for the one work that more than anything else gives us the clearest revelation of the divine character: the work of redemption. Edwards therefore believed that the history of redemption offered vast resources for knowing—and so for loving and enjoying—God, and it therefore occupies an appropriately prominent position in his corpus. Edwards approached history as fundamentally supernatural, and sought to demonstrate its harmony with Scripture. Some of the ways this thinking was manifested in Edwards' work are then illustrated, including not only the famous 'History of the Work of Redemption' but also some lesser-known projects that likewise demonstrate how seriously and consistently Edwards took the implications of God revealing himself through the providential workings of redemptive history.

Chapter 6: Edwards' Project of Interpreting the Harmony of Reality

In the final chapter, we propose that Edwards' project was to interpret the harmony of God's self-communication in nature, history and Scripture so that his fellow 'intelligent beings' could better fulfil their purpose for existence. Edwards' whole corpus can be explained in such terms. This theory is supported by the direction of his distinctive theology, the stated aims of his three projected 'great works' and by what he said about himself and his vocation. Edwards' high view of the ministerial office was emblematic of his understanding of the divine communicative project, whereby ministers were instruments to enable people to re-emanate divine revelation through the work of preaching, polemics and apologetics. This theory is discussed in relation to a sampling of other theories of Edwards' work.

We now turn to consider what Edwards meant when he said that God was a ‘communicative being.’²⁸

²⁸ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 332 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 410.

Chapter 1

Divine Communicativeness and Edwards' Theology of Revelation

‘The great and universal end of God’s creating the world was to communicate himself. God is a communicative being.’—Jonathan Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 332¹

I. Introduction

Edwards’ theology of divine revelation flows from his doctrines of the Trinity and of creation. Edwards was an orthodox Trinitarian theologian of the Reformed tradition, but the particular expression of his Trinitarianism was shaped somewhat by his Enlightenment context.² Partially in response to charges by freethinking proto-liberals that the Trinity was flagrantly irrational and unbiblical, Edwards developed a nucleus of related concepts that offered some tentative insight into the beautiful rationality of the Triune God.³ One of these concepts was communicativeness, wherein Edwards argued that the universally acknowledged attribute of God’s goodness implies a disposition to share or ‘communicate’ that goodness, calling for an eternal plurality in the divine being.⁴ In a similar manner, communicativeness furnished the answer to a theological problem that intrigued Edwards throughout his career: why did God create? His answer was that God is a communicative being, and that he created the world to communicate himself to other beings.⁵ The character of these doctrines of God and creation, hinging as they do on divine communicativeness, naturally had a controlling influence on Edwards’ theology of

¹ *Works Vol. 13*, p. 410.

² The orthodoxy of Edwards’ Trinitarianism has occasionally been challenged. See Richard M. Webber, ‘The Trinitarian Theology of Jonathan Edwards: An Investigation of Charges against Its Orthodoxy’ in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 2 (2001), pp. 297-318.

³ Edwards’ first notebook entry on the Trinity begins with the words ‘There has been much cry of late against saying one word, particularly about the Trinity...’. Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 94 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 256.

⁴ Edwards was admittedly stepping beyond the bounds of strict scriptural exegesis on this point. See Edwards’ defence of the use of reason and theological extrapolation in ‘Miscellany’ 94, *ibid*.

⁵ This is the thesis of *The End for Which God Created the World* completed near the end of Edwards’ life, but the idea is found in his notebooks as early as ‘Miscellany’ gg composed in April 1723 when he was but 19 years old. See Thomas A. Schafer, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 92.

revelation. At a time when the Deists were arguing persuasively for the sufficiency of human reason to know God, the concept of communicativeness provided the basis for a highly robust doctrine of divine revelation. It was not that some impersonal knowledge of the Deity was the by-product of the Clockmaker's world machine; it was rather that the universe was designed precisely to be the means of God's personal communication to men and angels. Thus every aspect of reality—nature and history as well as special revelation—was invested with revelatory content and intended for joyful human appropriation. Moreover, as a repetition *ad extra* of the communicative activity eternally operative inside the Trinity, the content of revelation corresponds to the content of the Trinity's own communication *ad intra*. Perhaps most determinative for the distinctive bent of Edwards' work, this correspondence means that revelation is necessarily correlative of the Trinity's own multi-dimensional communication, so that it consists of affectional and beatific components as well as noetic.⁶ This chapter will explore these issues in Edwards' theology as the foundation for his Trinitarian doctrine of revelation.

II. Communicativeness as a Divine Attribute

We begin with the concept of communicativeness.⁷ As a preliminary definition of the term, communicativeness is the inclination or disposition to convey or transmit something of oneself. In Edwards' eighteenth century usage, one might 'communicate' money, love or beauty as well as the verbal information that is normally associated with communication today. Philosophically, communicativeness is closely related to other Edwardsean concepts such as goodness, excellency, harmony and beauty.⁸ While Edwards sometimes uses these terms nearly synonymously in view of their inherent mutuality and other times uses them more precisely, the relationship seems to go something like this: communicativeness is the disposition continually arising in those who are good to share their own happiness. Happiness is the perception of beauty, which consists of simple or complex harmonies among entities physical or spiritual. Excellency has the components of greatness and beauty, or the quantity and quality of one's consent

⁶ It is sometimes unclear whether Edwards conceived of the non-noetic content of communication to be two distinct streams (love and joy separately) or one (love and joy together). See the discussion below, section IV.

⁷ Edwards does not use the noun form of the word found here. He does, however, use the verb 'communicate' often and the adjective 'communicative' not infrequently.

⁸ The most important discussion of these terms occurs in 'The Mind' entry 1 in *Works Vol. 6*, pp. 332-338.

to being.⁹ Some passing discussion of this terminology that was not used with perfect distinction even by Edwards himself will continue below,¹⁰ but what is most significant for this study is that Edwards thought of communicativeness *as a divine attribute*.

Before we can discuss this particular divine attribute meaningfully, it is requisite to explain something of Edwards' approach to attribute language generally. Amy Pauw has recently argued that Edwards self-consciously departed from his inheritance by inverting the long-standing priority of simplicity over triplicity in theology proper.¹¹ Whether or not Pauw is altogether correct in her assessment that Edwards adopted the opposite extreme, he surely did reject the former priority. Such a shift in emphasis could hardly fail to have significant implications for Edwards' understanding of the divine attributes. Indeed, as seen in 'Miscellany' 259, he asserts the impropriety of positing any real distinction in God beyond the three persons here described by the terms of the psychological model:

'Tis evident that there are no more than these three really distinct in God: God, and his idea, and his love or delight. We can't conceive of any further real distinctions. If you say there is the power of God, I answer, the power of a being, even in creatures, is nothing distinct from the being itself, besides a mere relation to an effect. If you say there is the infiniteness, eternity, and immutability of God, they are mere modes or manners of existence. [...] there is no more than these three in God, but what even in creatures are nothing but the same with the very being, or only some mere modes or relations.¹²

Edwards in effect pulls the rug from under traditional attribute language about God. The principal philosophical attributes—infinity, eternity, and immutability—are relegated to 'mere modes or manners of existence.'¹³ Edwards insists that all that can be said to be truly distinct in God are the three persons, although we can yet speak in

⁹ See Edwards, 'The Mind' entry 64, in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 382.

¹⁰ 'These at first may appear to be entirely distinct things: but if we more closely consider the matter, they will all appear to be one thing.' Edwards, *The End for which God Created the World* in *Works Vol. 8*, p. 527. Although written in a somewhat different context, these words give some sense of the consistently Trinitarian ease with which Edwards moved from distinction to ultimate unity among interrelated concepts.

¹¹ Amy Plantinga Pauw, "'One Alone Cannot be Excellent': Edwards on Divine Simplicity" in Paul Helm and Oliver D. Crisp, eds., *Jonathan Edwards: Philosophical Theologian* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 115-125.

¹² 'Miscellany' 259 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 367.

¹³ In another place, Edwards applies these very terms to God, but notice the predicate of this sentence '[I]t is evident, by both Scripture and reason, that God is infinitely, eternally, unchangeably, and independently *glorious and happy*.' Edwards, *Works Vol. 8*, p. 420. The philosophical attributes simply modify God's glory and happiness.

a secondary sense of their various characteristics as ‘modes or relations.’ If the Sabellian heresy conceives of a unitary God and his unitary attributes as the ‘real’ God and the three persons as mere modes, then Edwards is about as far away from this error as possible. The three persons of the Trinity are the real God, and the attributes are mere modes.

Consistent with his rejection of tritheism no less than his rejection of the priority of simplicity, Edwards thinks that the character of God may be boiled down to one thing—goodness or glory—which may also be denominated by three things—knowledge, love, and joy:¹⁴

The whole of God’s internal good or glory, is in these three things, viz. his infinite knowledge; his infinite virtue or holiness, and his infinite joy and happiness. Indeed there are a great many attributes in God, according to our way of conceiving or talking of them: but all may be reduced to these; or to the degree, circumstances and relations of these.¹⁵

For Edwards, the best way we can describe God is simply to restate in some way that he is Trinity. And as we shall see below, it is precisely the threefold content of God’s internal glory—knowledge, love and joy—which constitute the three elements or dimensions of God’s communication *ad extra*.

We are now in a better position to understand communicativeness as a divine attribute. Beyond knowledge, love and joy, Edwards leaves room for a ‘great many attributes,’ consisting of the ‘degree, circumstances and relations of these.’¹⁶

Communicativeness is the attribute that describes the *overflowing and transmissional circumstances* of God’s knowledge, love and joy. Now communicativeness is of course not to be found in the classical attribute lists, but perhaps there is reason to reconsider this omission. An eternal communication of knowledge and love between the persons of the Godhead is, after all, implied in an orthodox understanding of the Trinity. Consider Edwards’ statement of the psychological analogy:

So that by God’s thinking of the Deity, [the Deity] must certainly be generated. Hereby there is another person begotten; there is another

¹⁴ Much of *The End for Which God Created* is devoted to showing how God manifests in creation what he is in himself, and the Scriptures describe this summarily as being goodness or glory. Note also that in the *Nature of True Virtue*, Edwards thought that the nature of true ‘virtue’ was holy ‘love’, so that ‘virtue’ and ‘love’ become in this way functionally equivalent.

¹⁵ Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World*, in *Works Vol. 8*, p. 528.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

infinite, eternal, almighty, and most holy and the very same God, the very same divine nature. And this person is the second person in the Trinity, the only begotten and dearly beloved Son of God. [...] The Godhead being thus begotten by God's having an idea of himself and standing forth in a distinct subsistence or person in that idea, there proceeds a most pure act, and an infinitely holy and sweet energy arises between the Father and Son: for their love and joy is mutual, in mutually loving and delighting in each other. [...] the divine essence itself flows out and is as it were breathed forth in love and joy. So that the Godhead therein stands forth in yet another manner of subsistence, and there proceeds the third person in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

Following the Augustinian tradition, God is conceived of as thinker (Father), his ontologically real self-idea (Son), and the love flowing between them (Holy Spirit.) In this model, the Second and Third Persons are conceived of as 'begotten' of knowledge and 'breathed forth' by love respectively, concepts that denote what Edwards meant by the verb to communicate.

Moving on to some even more distinctively Edwardsean territory, Edwards thought that God's goodness implied a transmissional component we have termed communicativeness. In 'Miscellany' 96, Edwards is reasoning from the non-controversial doctrine of God's goodness to render more amenable to human logic the far more controversial doctrine of the Trinity:

It appears that there must be more than a unity in infinite and eternal essence, otherwise the goodness of God can have no perfect exercise. To be perfectly good is to incline to and delight in making another happy in the same proportion as it is happy itself, that is, to delight as much in *communicating* happiness to another as in enjoying of it himself, and an inclination to *communicate* all his happiness; it appears that this is perfect goodness, because goodness is delight in *communicating* happiness. Wherefore, if this goodness be perfect this delight must be perfect, because goodness and this delight are the same.¹⁸

We all know that God must be good, but what exactly does that mean? Edwards thinks that to be good is 'to incline to and delight in making another happy in the same proportion as it is happy itself, that is, to delight as much in *communicating* happiness to another as in enjoying of it himself.' A unitary god would seem to have no means of exercising this inclination in eternity, and for this reason, 'there must be more than a unity' in God. And the only 'perfect exercise' of this inclination

¹⁷ 'Discourse on the Trinity' in *Works Vol. 21*, pp. 116-117; 121.

¹⁸ 'Miscellany' 96 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 263-264; emphasis mine.

towards self-communication is ‘the Father’s begetting of the Son,’ which ‘is a complete *communication* of all his happiness, and so an eternal, adequate and infinite exercise of perfect goodness, that is completely equal to such an inclination in perfection.’¹⁹ Thus God’s communicative nature (goodness) can be seen as entailing the plurality of the ontological Trinity.

III. Communicativeness and Creation

Edwards brings his understanding of God’s communicative nature to bear on a question that interested him throughout his life: why did God create?²⁰ Though the specific formulation of his answer to this question would develop over time, the basic kernel is seen in ‘Miscellany’ 332:

The great and universal end of God’s creating the world was to *communicate* himself. *God is a communicative being.* This communication is really only to intelligent beings: the communication of himself to their understandings is his glory, and the communication of himself with respect to their wills, the enjoying faculty, is their happiness. God created the world for the shining forth of his excellency and for the flowing forth of his happiness. It don’t make God the happier to be praised, but it is a becoming and condecant and worthy thing for infinite and supreme excellency to shine forth: ‘tis not his happiness but his excellency so to do.’²¹

It is important first of all to recognise that Edwards does not think of God’s communicativeness as purely economic. In asserting that God is a communicative being, Edwards is referring to a logically prior theology whereby God is inherently communicative *ad intra* among the persons of the Godhead. As he states in a corollary to ‘Miscellany’ 104, communicativeness is thus something like an essential attribute of God: ‘for it is his essence to incline to communicate himself.’²² On this understanding, it makes sense for Edwards to suppose that ‘The great and universal end of God’s creating the world was to communicate himself;’ God was continuing *ad extra* the communicative activity that is necessarily and eternally present *ad intra*.²³

¹⁹ ‘Miscellany’ 104 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 272.

²⁰ For a full discussion of this subject, see Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), chapter 2.

²¹ ‘Miscellany’ 332 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 410; emphasis mine.

²² ‘Miscellany’ 107[b] in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 277-278.

²³ ‘Miscellany’ 332 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 410. Edwards of course has the mighty task of explaining why the creation, though explained in terms of God’s nature, is yet a non-necessary or voluntary

Secondly, notice the emphasis Edwards places on the *intelligent* reception of God's communication. It is not that God communicates himself simply by the mere existence of a physical creation; 'his communication is really only to intelligent beings' so there must be creatures who have the capacity to know God. Moreover, these intelligent creatures must have 'the enjoying faculty' or the capacity to enjoy God. As Edwards makes clear elsewhere, '...if there were not intelligent beings in the world, all the world would be without any end at all.'²⁴ Thus had there never existed at least one angel or human who knew and enjoyed God, all of created reality would have been utterly purposeless.

Before leaving this most important passage, we might pause to consider the purpose of Edwards' distinction in the final sentence between 'happiness' and 'excellency.' In this 'Miscellany' entry, which would eventually feed into his full-scale treatise *The End for which God Created the World*, Edwards is careful to avoid making God in any way dependent upon the creation. God is a communicative being whether *ad intra* or *ad extra*. Yet the associated mode or relation that is linked with this communication differs between these cases; Edwards thinks that happiness goes with the former and excellency with the latter. Happiness '...consists in the perception of these three things: of the consent of being to its own being; of its own consent to being; and of being's consent to being.'²⁵ As discussed above in relation to 'Miscellany' 96, the happiness of Father, Son and Holy Spirit entails that they be communicative one with another. They do so or they would not be God. God is communicative *ad extra*, however, out of his 'excellency'. Edwards defines this term in 'The Mind' as 'The consent of being to being, or being's consent to entity.'²⁶ As it stands, this definition of excellency seems to give little in way of meaningful differentiation from happiness, but judging from Edwards' usage the nuance appears to be terms of relative externality. Both excellency and harmony arise from the state of perfect harmony and consent to being, but excellency can and perhaps *should* be seen from the outside: 'it is a becoming and condecant and worthy thing for infinite and supreme excellency to shine forth.'²⁷

action, a task undertaken in section IV of *The End for which God Created the World* in *Works Vol. 8*, pp. 445-463.

²⁴ 'Miscellany' gg in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 185.

²⁵ 'The Mind' entry 1 in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 338.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 336.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

Such terminological issues aside, communicativeness is indeed the answer to the question posed by *The End for Which God Created the World*. What moved God to create the world? Answer: a ‘disposition to communicate himself.’²⁸ And it is this particular divine attribute, this disposition of God to communicate himself, that provides the basis for all revelation both general and special. God’s project has always been, and will always be, to *communicate* himself. He does this ontologically in his eternal Triune existence, and he does this economically by communicating himself to his intelligent creatures.²⁹

IV. The Content of Revelation

So it is God’s nature as Trinity to communicate. And the content of what God communicates is, in the final analysis, *himself*. Everything that intelligent creatures (angels and humans) can receive by divine revelation is something that is first to be found in the eternal communication between the persons of the Godhead. And there is really nothing in this eternal communication other than God’s knowledge, love and joy. This simple but profound correlation is one that has far-reaching implications for Edwards’ understanding of revelation. Though a number of surrounding issues require attention in this section, the one having the most importance for this study as a whole is Edwards’ tri-dimensional conception of revelation as including noetic, affectional and beatific aspects.

We begin with a brief overview of some relevant issues in Edwards’ philosophy. As a rough summary, Edwards formulated a Christian version of idealism that incorporated certain aspects of Locke as well as Malebranche.³⁰ He thought ‘...that all existence is mental, that the existence of all exterior things is

²⁸ Edwards, *The End for which God Created the World* in *Works Vol. 8*, p. 433.

²⁹ Before leaving Edwards’ doctrine of creation, it should be noted that Edwards believed in a *continuous* creation. ‘It [is] most agreeable to the Scripture, to suppose creation to be performed new every moment.’ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 346 in *Works Volume 13*, p. 418. Although such a doctrine would seem to have potential importance for his theology of revelation, Edwards does not seem to make any connections along these lines. Such a doctrine is however, surely consistent with his radical anti-deist agenda. See my ‘Rage against the Machine: Jonathan Edwards vs. The God of Deism,’ *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 1 (2007), pp. 70-71.

³⁰ The genealogy of Edwards’ philosophy has been debated. See, for example, Norman S. Fiering, ‘The Rationalist Foundations of Jonathan Edwards’s Metaphysics’ in Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 73-101; Paul Copan, ‘Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophical Influences: Lockean or Malebranchean?’ *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 1 (2001), pp. 107-24; and William J. Danaher Jr., *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Louisville, KY and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 19-26.

ideal.’³¹ But in stark contrast to Locke’s confession of ‘I know not what,’³² Edwards found the substance of the world of ideas directly in the Trinity, in God’s reflective knowledge of himself.

And indeed, the secret lies here: that which truly is the substance of all bodies is the infinitely exact and precise and perfectly stable idea in God’s mind, together with his stable will that *the same shall gradually be communicated to us*, and to other minds, according to certain fixed and exact established methods and laws.³³

This ‘secret’ that so inevitably eluded the Unitarian Locke came quite naturally to the deeply Trinitarian Edwards, as it no doubt came to the Augustinian Catholic Malebranche.³⁴ All ideas have their origin and substance in God’s idea he has of himself, which is the second person of the Triune God.

It is important to glean what this signal passage from ‘The Mind’ quoted above means for Edwards’ theology of revelation. All that exists resides in the divine mind, and there can be nothing in creation that did not come from, and forever remains grounded in, the Trinity. But this divine ‘idea’ is ‘gradually *communicated* to us, and to other minds.’³⁵ There is thus a real correlation between our knowledge and God’s. The difference between our situation and God’s at this point would seem to be that this divine idea is known immediately and comprehensively by God, whereas it is only gradually conveyed to our finite minds over the course of time ‘according to certain fixed and exact methods and laws.’

In another place, however, Edwards explains that the difference between our knowledge and God’s knowledge is beyond that of simple time delay. This is found in an early ‘Miscellany’ on the Trinity:

The Almighty’s knowledge is not so different from ours, but that ours is the image of [it]. It is by an idea, as ours is, only his [is] infinitely

³¹ ‘The Mind’ entry 9, in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 341.

³² Locke, *Essay*, II.23.15.

³³ *Works Vol. 6*, p. 344; emphasis mine.

³⁴ While the personal religious views of John Locke are controversial, a conclusion that he was at least a Unitarian seems probable. See Victor Nuovo, ‘Locke’s Theology’ and John Marshall, ‘Locke, Socinianism, “Socinianism”, and Unitarianism’ both in M. A. Stewart, ed., *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Dewey D. Wallace, Jr. ‘Socinianism, Justification by Faith, and the Sources of John Locke’s The Reasonableness of Christianity’ *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Jan 1984 pp.49-66; and Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), chapter 4.

³⁵ Edwards habitually includes the angels in his discussion of the human situation, often using the blanket term ‘intelligent creatures’ to cover both. Here, ‘other minds’ seems to serve as the philosophic equivalent.

perfect. [...] None will suppose that God has any such ideas as we [have], that are only as it were the shadow of things and not the very things. We cannot suppose that God reflects on himself after the imperfect manner we reflect on things, for we can view nothing immediately.³⁶

Unlike in the case of the Father begetting the Son, our ideas do not beget some ontologically real image. God's knowledge is 'by an idea' but one that is 'infinitely perfect' and ours, quite simply, is not. For, unlike God, 'we can view nothing immediately.' Edwards' statements on immediacy must be interpreted in terms of their specific context, but when he is writing with philosophic precision he denies emphatically that we can have truly immediate knowledge.³⁷ What we have is, 'as it were the shadow of things.' Such a caveat would seem to preserve the creator-creature distinction endangered by the otherwise identical idea given to creatures in revelation.³⁸

The notion that our knowledge of God is ectypal of God's archetypal knowledge of himself is standard in the history of theology. Edwards held an ontology consistent with this theology when he said that the universe itself is nothing other than the ongoing realisation of the divine idea.³⁹ Edwards also proposes an epistemology that is likewise consistent:

Our perceptions, or ideas that we passively receive by our bodies, are communicated to us immediately by God while our minds are united to our bodies; but only we in some measure know the rule. We know that upon such alterations in our bodies there follow such ideas in the mind.⁴⁰

Not only do our ideas necessarily originate from God's ideas, they are also 'immediately' communicated to us by God while our bodies 'passively receive' them. Here 'immediately' seems to mean that, despite appearances to the contrary, there is no real secondary causation of our ideas through sensory input, but only a concurrence according to God's 'rule.' In signature Edwardsean style, the

³⁶ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 94 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 257-258.

³⁷ See also Edwards, 'Miscellany' 777 in *Works Vol. 18*, pp. 427-428.

³⁸ Edwards develops this reasoning in *ibid*.

³⁹ See above, and Edwards, 'Of Being' in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 204. See also 'Miscellany' 697 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 282.

⁴⁰ Edwards, 'The Mind' entry 3, in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 339.

counterpoint to Deist interpretations of idealism predicated on the autonomy of human reason and the epistemological dispensability of God, is utterly complete.⁴¹

With this philosophy in mind, we consider the noetic content of revelation. Returning to Edwards' psychological model of the Trinity, the 'idea' God is communicating is not at all something outside of or apart from God, but the Word of God:

Again, that which is the express image of God, in which God enjoys infinite happiness, and is also the Word of God, is God's perfect idea of God. The Word of God, in its most proper meaning, is a transcript of the divine perfections. This Word is either the declared Word of God or the essential: the one is the copy of the divine perfections given to us, the other is the perfect transcript thereof in God's own mind.⁴²

This 'perfect idea' is identical with the Word of God, which is also the 'transcript of the divine perfections.' What is being communicated to intelligent beings is not just knowledge *about* God, but is in some way the Son of God himself. He is the transcript, the perfect representation of the divine perfections that God was disposed to share outside of himself. And this self-giving continues on for eternity, as more and more of the infinite 'transcript' is read and understood by intelligent minds but never exhausted.⁴³

In this sense, the incarnation was not the first time God shared his Son with humanity; the process of giving began with the creation. This principle may in fact be why Edwards' theology of revelation does not place as much emphasis *per se* on the incarnation as might otherwise be anticipated. Although there were absolutely critical portions of God's communicative project that came only with the incarnation,⁴⁴ the Son of God has been 'gradually communicated to us' throughout

⁴¹ For Edwards' response to Deism, see Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and my 'Rage Against the Machine: Jonathan Edwards vs. The God of Deism' *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 1 (2007), pp. 61-79.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 259.

⁴³ See for example Paul Ramsay's discussion of the eternal state in Appendix III to *Works Vol. 8*.

⁴⁴ See Edwards, 'Miscellany' 554, in *Works Vol. 18*, pp. 98-99.

all reality since the creation.⁴⁵ However, this conception does not prevent Edwards from recognising the unique revelatory role given to the incarnate Christ:

Who can be so properly appointed to be [the] revealer of God to the world, as that person who is God's own perfect idea or understanding of himself? Who can be so properly appointed to be the light by which God's glory shall appear to creatures, as he is that effulgence of his glory by which he appears to himself? And this is intimated to us in the Scripture to be the reason why Christ is the light of the world and the revealer of God to men, because he is the image of God.⁴⁶

Thus, in concert with the Reformed orthodox tradition, Christ is the 'revealer of God to the world' as well as the content of that revelation.⁴⁷

Thus far, although we have been discussing general principles, the noetic content of God's communication reflecting the content of the Triune divine mind as particularly embodied in the Son has been most prominent. In brief, however, we note that the same concept applies to the communication of God's love as the Holy Spirit. In the context of discussing the *charismata*, Edwards explains that the Spirit gives more than mere gifts seen as detached entities:

[When] the Spirit by his ordinary influences bestows saving grace, he therein imparts himself to the soul in his own holy nature; that nature on account of which he is so often called in Scripture the Holy Ghost, or the Holy Spirit. By his producing this effect the Spirit becomes an indwelling vital principle in the soul, and the subject becomes a spiritual being, denominated so from the Spirit of God which dwells in him and of whose nature he is a partaker [II Pet 1:4]. Yea, grace is as it were the holy nature of the Spirit of God imparted to the soul.⁴⁸

Just as the believer does not get a detached word from God but the very Word, what is 'imparted' to the believer spiritually is not mere gifts but the Holy Spirit himself.

In principle, the same concept would seem to apply to the communication of joy. Here the question arises as to how Edwards aligned this aspect of Trinitarian

⁴⁵ It might yet be asked why Edwards does not view the incarnation as the paradigmatic medium of revelation, eliciting from him the kind of extensive discussion he gave to the other media. We are not aware of any direct statement on the matter, but it would seem to us that the trajectory of Edwards' philosophical theology and robust doctrines of revelation in nature, history and Scripture simply led him to think in terms of the immediately available transmissional media. We cannot see the incarnate Christ now, but we can know him through Scripture and see his glorious works in nature and redemptive history.

⁴⁶ Edwards, 'Discourse on the Trinity' in *Works Vol. 21*, p. 121.

⁴⁷ See Richard Muller, 'Christ—the Revelation or the Revealer? Brunner and Reformed Orthodoxy on the Doctrine of the Word of God,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26, no. 3 (1983), p. 307.

⁴⁸ *Works Vol. 8*, p. 158.

revelation with a particular person of the Trinity. Edwards for instance links the Son with God's 'name' and the Spirit with God's 'glory,' but demurs from making similar associations with the First Person.⁴⁹ The fundamental problem is simply that the Father could never be communicated in the way that the Son and the Spirit are. Thus there are only two persons available to map specifically to the transmission of the three elements of Trinitarian revelation. In the main, Edwards tends to identify the Spirit with joy as well as to love:

It may be thus expressed: the Son is the Deity generated by God's understanding, or having an idea of himself; the Holy Ghost is the divine essence flowing out, or breathed forth, in infinite *love and delight*. Or, which is the same, the Son is God's idea of himself, and *the Spirit is God's love to and delight in himself*.⁵⁰

Another possible avenue on this matter is that joy constitutes for Edwards a kind of a complexity, so that joy requires not only love but also the possession of the associated ideas.⁵¹ In this way it is possible that Edwards conceived of both the Son and the Spirit as particularly involved in communicating joy.⁵²

In any case, Edwards was certain that there were indeed three aspects or dimensions of divine self-communication: knowledge, love and joy. Edwards says this in various places and contexts but the most comprehensive statement is no doubt to be found in *The End for which God Created the World*:

As there is an infinite fullness of all possible good in God, a fullness of every perfection, of all excellency and beauty, and of infinite happiness. And as this fullness is capable of communication or emanation *ad extra*; so it seems a thing amiable and valuable in itself that it should be communicated or flow forth, that this infinite fountain of good should send forth abundant streams, that this infinite fountain of light should, diffusing its excellent fullness, pour forth light all around. [...] From this view it appears another way to be a thing in itself valuable, that there should be such things as the *knowledge* of God's glory in other beings, and an high esteem of it, *love* to it, and *delight* and complacency in it: this appears I say in another way, viz.

⁴⁹ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 1084 in *Works Vol. 20*, p. 467; emphasis mine.

⁵⁰ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 405 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 468; emphasis mine. See also Edwards, 'Miscellany' 448 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 495.

⁵¹ 'For a very clear idea of sorrow, or joy, or any act, exercise or passion of the mind, is the very same thing in a degree existing in the mind that it is an idea of, as I have shown in my discourse about the Trinity.' Edwards, 'Miscellany' 621 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 152.

⁵² Whether Edwards recognised any problem here is questionable. He could potentially have made reference to perichoresis on this issue, but does not appear to have done so.

*as these things are but the emanations of God's own knowledge,
holiness and joy.*⁵³

God possesses a fullness of 'all possible good,' and this fullness is 'capable of communication or emanation.' It is indeed 'amiable and valuable' that such a communication might occur. More to our point here, the content of this communication is 'God's own knowledge, holiness and joy.'⁵⁴ Much like the Trinity's communication *ad intra*, the tri-dimensional content of revelation is 'the knowledge of God's glory,' 'love to it' and 'delight and complacency in it.'

V. The Process of Revelation

We lastly consider the process of Trinitarian revelation in Edwards' theology. Recall again Edwards' psychological representation of the Trinity, consisting of the Father, the ontologically real idea of himself (the Son) and the love between them (the Holy Spirit). In a cognate way, the process of revelation consists of imparting God's idea to human persons, inculcating them with a love for this idea and thereby bringing them into a joyful state approaching ever closer to that of God. Such a process is characteristically tri-dimensional, consisting of interrelated noetic, affectional and beatific elements.

Edwards establishes a clear analogy between God's glorious existence as Trinity and the God's glorification of himself through intelligent creation in 'Miscellany' 448:

God is glorified within himself these two ways: (1) by appearing or being manifested to himself in his own perfect idea, or, in his Son, who is the brightness of his glory; (2) by enjoying and delighting in himself, by flowing forth in infinite love and delight towards himself, or, in his Holy Spirit. So God glorifies himself towards the creatures also two ways: (1) by appearing to them, being manifested to their understandings; (2) in communicating himself to their hearts, and in their rejoicing and delighting in, and enjoying the manifestations which he makes of himself. [...] God is glorified not only by his glory being seen, but by its being rejoiced in, when those that see it delight in it: God is more glorified than if they only see it; his glory is then received by the soul, both by the understanding and by the heart.⁵⁵

⁵³ Edwards, *The End for which God Created the World* in *Works* Vol. 8, pp. 432-433; emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ Again, as shown in the next sentence quoted, 'holiness' for Edwards is at least sometimes functionally equivalent to love.

⁵⁵ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 448 in *Works* Vol. 13, p. 495.

It is not only that the content of what we know is a copy of what God knows. It is also that the working or process of God's communication to us is made explicitly analogous to God's own glorious communicative existence. Here the emphasis is on how both noetic and beatific elements are indispensable to the communication of God's glory. God is glorified merely in being known, but more so in being delighted in. In fact, Edwards concludes, 'God made the world that he might [be] received both by the mind and the heart.'⁵⁶

The principle of Trinitarian cooperation between noetic and non-noetic (affectional and beatific) elements is useful in understanding some of the most distinctive aspects of Edwards' theological project, and indeed, the particular shape of his preaching.⁵⁷ It is, however, only very occasionally stated explicitly in the sermons. Since this is so, these few instances would seem to call for our particular attention, as in this 1739 sermon:

No speech can be any means of grace, but by conveying knowledge... He that doth not understand, can receive no faith, nor any other grace; for God deals with man as with a rational creature; and when faith is in exercise, it is not about something he knows not what... So there can be no love without knowledge. It is not according to the nature of the human soul, to love an object which is entirely unknown.⁵⁸

There is very little in Edwards' applied theology of revelation that is not said in the simple words, 'there can be no love without knowledge.' God's revelation of himself to us operates in the same way that it does within the Trinity: God knows himself, and he loves what he knows. Likewise, when we come to know God, our 'affections' are not something extraneous to the process of God communicating himself to us but indispensable elements. We must know God in order to love him, and if we know God, we should love him.

Edwards also works out the larger implications of God's revelatory project as analogous to the Trinity. In a way prefigured by but not really anticipated in Augustine's more prosaic psychological 'trinities', Edwards shows how the successful operation of God's self-communication to creatures leads to something like a repetition of the Trinity *ad extra*:

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ On Edwards' larger project, see below chapter 6. On Trinitarian preaching, see Edwards, 'Subjects to be Handled in the Treatise on the Mind' in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 388.

⁵⁸ Edwards, 'The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth' sermon on Heb 5:12 in *Works Vol. 22*, p. 88.

As the Father loveth the Son as a communication of himself, as begotten in pursuance of his eternal inclination to communicate himself; so the Son of God loveth the church, or the saints, as the effect of his love and goodness, and natural inclination to communicate himself. In this also there is a trinity, an image of the eternal Trinity; wherein Christ is the everlasting father, and believers are his seed, and the Holy Spirit, or Comforter, is the third person in Christ, being his delight and love flowing out towards the church. In believers the Spirit and delight of God, being communicated unto them, flows out toward the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵⁹

Thus God's communicative project to intelligent beings results in 'an image of the eternal Trinity.' The full measure of Edwards' theology of revelation might in fact be described as the process by which God creates out of believers an image of the Trinity.

With this analogy in mind, we consider Edwards' concise—and perhaps somewhat provocative—statement of the end goal of this process of communication:

There are many reasons to think that what God has in view, in an increasing communication of himself throughout eternity, is an increasing knowledge of God, love to him, and joy in him. And 'tis to be considered that the more those divine communications increase in the creature, the more it becomes one with God.⁶⁰

God's communication to his elect creatures consists of God actually imparting himself to them, so that they know God, love him and enjoy him in an eternally upward spiral. The product of this process is, according to Edwards, asymptotic union with God.⁶¹

VI. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the foundations of Edwards' doctrine of revelation in his doctrine of the Trinity and doctrine of creation. God is a 'communicative being,' and his project in creation was to communicate himself noetically, affectionally and beatifically. This concept is the bedrock of Edwards' theology of revelation, the comprehensive implications of which have begun to become apparent. The middle chapters of this thesis explore how God makes use of three media—nature, special revelation and history—to accomplish his communicative purposes in

⁵⁹ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 104 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 273-274.

⁶⁰ Edwards, *The End for Which God Created the World* in *Works Vol. 8*, p. 443.

⁶¹ See also Walter Shultz, 'Jonathan Edwards's End of Creation: An Exposition and Defense,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 2 (2006), p. 255.

creation and redemption. In the first of these middle chapters, we explore how Edwards appropriated the medium of nature.

Chapter 2

The Harmony of Creation

‘When we see beautiful airs of look and gesture, we naturally think the mind that resides within is beautiful. We have all the same, and more, reason to conclude the spiritual beauty of Christ from the beauty of the world; for all the beauties of the universe so as immediately result from the efficiency of Christ, as a cast of an eye or a smile of the countenance depends on the efficiency of the human soul.’

—Jonathan Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 185¹

I. Introduction

One of the characteristics of Edwards’ theology of revelation is its sheer comprehensiveness. If indeed everything in the universe exists to communicate God’s own knowledge, love and joy, then an adequate theology must provide a corresponding account of all aspects of reality. Just such an account is to be found in Edwards’ expansive and creative use of nature. This chapter explores how Edwards interpreted the creation as a medium of harmonious divine communication.

An alert surveyor of the twenty-seven-volume Yale Edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* might be intrigued at the seemingly disparate topics undertaken by the late Wallace Anderson, who was editor of *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* and was also, strangely perhaps, the lead editor of *Typological Writings*. The curiosity continues when we learn that Anderson actually planned to include the typological material in with the scientific and philosophical volume but was prevented from doing so only by space constraints.² On the face of it, there would hardly seem to be two categories of the Edwards corpus having less in common with one another than his scientific and philosophical writings and his typological writings. The former comprises the most characteristically modern part of Edwards’ thought and the latter (perhaps with ‘Notes on the Apocalypse’) the most thoroughly arcane.

But this appearance of disjuncture in Anderson’s assignments merely reflects contemporary assumptions about the nature of the universe and legitimate methods

¹ *Works Vol. 13*, p. 330.

² Harry S. Stout, ‘Forward’ to *Works Vol. 11*, p. xiii.

of acquiring knowledge from it, assumptions whose eighteenth century precursors Edwards thoroughly rejected. What might seem to be mutually unintelligible if not contradictory pursuits were in fact complementary and integral elements of Edwards' unitary project to interpret all reality under the heading of God's purposeful and harmonious self-revelation. There is nothing in the natural world that is without its significance, and it is the duty of human observers to recognise this meaning as completely as possible, using all the interpretive tools they have available.³ For Edwards, these tools included typological interpretation as well as scientific observation and philosophical speculation. Through these means, people are enabled to fulfil both their own ultimate purpose as intelligent creatures and the purpose of the phenomena they observe, which is in both cases to glorify God. Anderson's strange assignment actually serves as an astute testimony to what Edwards was attempting.

So although we are here obliged to pursue Edwards' doctrine of natural revelation in some isolation from the rest of his thought, and moreover to parse this doctrine into its constituent elements of science, natural typology and 'mysticism'⁴, we must do so mindful that they remain part of an interconnected whole. And because these elements represent facets of a single gem, certain themes will inevitably reoccur. It is hoped that instead of devolving into meaningless repetition, such reoccurrences will rather evoke the sense of ultimate unity that is in keeping with Edwards' work.

The first facet to be examined will be science. Some of Edwards' earliest intellectual pursuits were in science, and his unfulfilled promise in this discipline in favour of theology was a source of regret for some earlier interpreters.⁵ But Edwards recognised neither conflict nor discontinuity between his science and his faith, as evidenced by the amount of work done in this area after his conversion, and even

³ See, for example, Edwards, 'Miscellany' 1218 in *Works Vol. 23*, p. 153.

⁴ Since the term denotes a kind of experience that is basically consonant with Edwards but also implies a religious epistemology that is not, 'mystic' will appear in inverted commas throughout.

⁵ 'Critics filled with the spirit of modern positivism rashly declare that...he was a potential scientist thwarted by his environment and forced into the uncongenial wastes of theology.' Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloan Associates, 1949), p. 46. Clarence H. Faust cites Moses Coit Tyler and Carl Van Doren among such critics. Faust, 'Jonathan Edwards as a Scientist,' *American Literature* 1 (1930), p. 393. Clyde A. Holbrook adds Benjamin Silliman and Rufus Suter. Holbrook, 'Jonathan Edwards and His Detractors,' *Theology Today* 10 (1953), pp. 391-2. The estimation of Edwards' scientific potential began with Sereno Dwight: 'Had his life been devoted to these pursuits...he would have met with no ordinary success, in extending the bounds of human knowledge in the most important and interesting fields of Physical Science.' Dwight, *Life of President Edwards*, in *Works in Two Volumes I*, p. 54.

after his call to the ministry.⁶ By Edwards' lights, advancing the body of scientific knowledge was in itself a laudable activity, since it contributed to the human testimony of God's glorious works. Edwards did, however, recognise with the keenest of perception that materialist and mechanistic interpretations of science could only undermine true religion, and his natural philosophy must be understood as formulated in self-conscious opposition to these tendencies.⁷ His atomic theory thus served as a culturally relevant way to demonstrate the necessity of active, intelligent and infinite power continuously exerted by the biblical God. In this mode, Edwards approached nature in a way not unlike the way he approached the other media of revelation: as material to be brought in the service of apologetic, polemic or homiletic tasks working towards the transformation of man, and ultimately, to the glorification of God.

Edwards' later use of nature, the relevant manuscripts of which were the subject of Anderson's second assignment, was in the typological interpretation of natural phenomena. For Edwards, 'types' such as the Sun were not merely convenient illustrations, but contrivances created by God for the very purpose of pointing to their singular antitypes, such as Christ. Edwards in fact thought that one could learn the principles established by Scripture for natural typology, the very 'language of God', and thus become enabled to interpret virtually any aspect of nature as a semiotic message conveying divine revelation. No entirely new truth unheard of in Scripture would be discovered in this way, but Edwards' point was never to access bare data for its own sake; he sought rather to appropriate the full aesthetic dimensions of God's harmonious self-communication.

A related but significantly different use of nature in Edwards' writing is the 'mystical.' The 'Personal Narrative' contains an account of Edwards' own post-conversion experience of nature, describing the express apprehension of the divine that bears a formal resemblance to classical mysticism. This account suggests that Edwards interpreted his experience as perceiving God's presence and attributes through natural phenomena. However, it also suggests that such an experience is

⁶ '...Edwards found no conflict between his scientific interests and his religious convictions and vocation, and his interest in science did not flag after his conversion. On the contrary, the major body of notes and discussions in 'Natural Philosophy' were written after his conversion, and he wrote the 'Spider' letter and began to plan his treatise at the very time that he was actively seeking a pulpit, during the summer and autumn of 1723.' Anderson, 'Editor's Introduction,' in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 37.

⁷ For the best statement of this issue, see Robert W. Jensen, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 27.

available only to regenerate minds seeing through the lens of Scripture. Edwards' also displayed a certain apparent affinity with the American Romantic tradition, but this will be shown to be merely apparent. In the final analysis, although Edwards was neither a mystic nor a Romantic, his thought provided an outlet for the balanced expression of the legitimate concerns that stood behind both schools.

After discussing the various instances and uses of nature in Edwards' writings, we turn to consider the complex question of natural theology. Edwards stood in the stream of the orthodox Reformed faith, and his basic position is very much that of Calvin. But Edwards also lived during the Enlightenment, and he self-consciously took on the task of formulating orthodoxy in terms relevant to the intellectual climate of the day. In response to the challenges posed by Deists such as Tindal and Chubb, Edwards tirelessly subjected 'natural divinity' to a withering critique on multiple fronts.⁸ Yet Edwards often co-opted or enlarged upon whatever grain of truth could be found in his opponents, and true to form he granted natural revelation an objective epistemic status approaching that of, and indeed confirming, Scripture.⁹ On one level, nature was reiterative of Scripture: whether in science, types or even 'mystical' experience, there are no new *notional propositions* to be found in nature. Yet without revelation in nature, something vital would be missing even for the Christian. That 'something' includes the complementary rounding out and mutual confirmation of special revelation. Edwards goes on to imply that the active, aesthetically dimensioned appreciation of nature by believers is itself an indispensable aspect of the Christian life. Without this doxological participation, Christians, as God's intelligent worshippers, and the creation, as God's self-revelation, both fall short of their divinely ordained purposes for existence.

II. Edwards as Scientist

Edwards' work as a scientist *per se* consists of a sizeable notebook containing his ambitious metaphysical speculations and a few naturalist essays, all done in the 1720's.¹⁰ This material shall be covered under the following headings: Edwards as Naturalist, Edwards as Physicist, The Harmony of Creation and Edwards' Approach to Science.

⁸ See Edwards, 'Miscellanies' 1170, 1126, 1239, 1298, 1301, 1302, 1304, 1313, 1337, 1338, 1340, and 1350; all in *Works Vol. 23*.

⁹ See Edwards, 'Images of Divine Things' entry 70 in *Works Vol. 11*, p. 74.

¹⁰ All contained in *Works Vol. 6*.

1. Edwards as Naturalist

Edwards' first attempt at publication was in fact an indirect submission to a scientific journal. The famous 'Spider Letter,' which was written not by a precocious boy genius as was once supposed but by a recent university graduate just turned twenty, was intended to be sent to the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*.¹¹ An American correspondent to the Society had lately and successfully forwarded his Harvard classmate Timothy Edwards' account of a prodigious pumpkin vine, but the piece by Timothy's son Jonathan on spiders was not as fortunate.¹² In any case, Edwards' keen observation and patient experimentation explaining the 'flying' spider's amazing aerial mobility were intended to exhibit aspects of God's glorious character that were to be interpreted from nature: 'Hence the exuberant goodness of the Creator, who hath not only provided for all the necessities, but also for the pleasure and recreation of all sorts of creatures, even the insects.'¹³ After going on to theorise about the life cycle and predation of spiders, Edwards draws a corollary along similar lines: '*The wisdom of the Creator is also admirable* in so nicely and mathematically adjusting their plastic nature, that notwithstanding their destruction by this means and the multitudes that are eaten by birds, that they do not decrease and so by little come to nothing...'.¹⁴ God's goodness and wisdom are constantly on display in the theatre of his creation, and Edwards wanted to make sure that no detail of it, and certainly not those so luminously reflective of their Creator, went unnoticed.

These quotations from the Spider letter also serve to indicate the affectional dimension Edwards emphasised in his science no less than in his theology. It is not merely that God is good and wise, but that his goodness is 'exuberant' and his wisdom is 'admirable' in its execution. This appreciation of what Edwards' usually called God's 'excellency' was predicated on first knowing something in noetic terms, but it was then an affectional valuation that could be truly entered into only by those

¹¹ Edwards' first biographer, Sereno E. Dwight, proposed a pre-Yale matriculation date for the draft letter, or about age 13. This was followed by Egbert C. Smyth in 'The Flying Spider—Observations by Jonathan Edwards when a Boy,' *Andover Review* Vol. 13 pp. 5-13, and others up until Thomas A. Schafer's meticulous manuscript dating work cast doubt upon it and the discovery of the actual dated letter disproved it. See Anderson, *Works* Vol. 6, pp. 3 n.4, 6, 147.

¹² The original letter bears the name 'Lister' on it, apparently written by a reader indicating that the English naturalist Lister had earlier published similar accounts of spiders in the *Philosophical Transactions*, probably explaining why Edwards' letter was never published. Anderson, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works* Vol. 6, p. 151-53.

¹³ Edwards, 'The Spider Letter' in *Works* Vol. 6, p. 167.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 168; emphasis mine.

endowed with the ‘New Sense.’¹⁵ And it was this affectional appreciation, as a veritable form of worship, which was the goal of all God’s revelation. Edwards shows a diligent but limited interest in the preliminary stage of asserting scientific data, and appears almost impatient to move from factual recognition to doxological participation. If all had gone as he hoped for his essay, the *Transactions of the Royal Society* would have been used as a venue to deliver a liturgy and an implicit invitation to worship into the hands of its cultured subscribers.

2. Edwards as Physicist

Edwards’ speculations in physics followed a somewhat different method than his naturalist papers, but they were pursued for the same ends. Here Edwards was reasoning from material he had in books rather than from direct observation of nature, and in this pursuit he was perhaps alone among American colonial scientists.¹⁶ Also, Edwards’ specifically apologetic interests against theologically problematic aspects of the New Science are closer to the surface in his physics. But his larger goal in these labours—to do exegesis of the physical universe in ways that would glorify the Creator and provoke his readers to intelligent worship—remained the same.

Atomic theory, along with Newtonian physics, was a central component in Edwards’ physics. As derived from the theory of Henry Moore, atoms were not the stuff of modern chemistry, in which they comprise a microcosmic solar system of other particles. Rather, they were defined as utterly solid, perfectly uniform, and simple matter, perhaps more resembling the subatomic particles of quantum physics. In any case, Edwards found in atomic theory a likely avenue to work against the prevailing mechanistic conceptions of nature he found to be so destructive to orthodox theology and corrosive to God’s purposes in creation.¹⁷ In his thinking, atoms required constant, intelligent and infinite power to keep them in existence and

¹⁵ See, for example, Perry Miller, ‘Jonathan Edwards on the Sense of the Heart,’ *Harvard Theological Review* 41 (1948), pp. 123-45; and William J. Wainwright, ‘Jonathan Edwards and the Sense of the Heart,’ *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990), pp. 43-62.

¹⁶ ‘Edwards appears to be nearly unique among colonial scientists in the early eighteenth century, in that while their contributions were overwhelmingly in the fields of natural history, agriculture, and medicine, his primary interests and efforts were directed to problems in physics.’ Anderson, ‘Editor’s Introduction,’ in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 39.

¹⁷ ‘The contrasts between Edwards’ early metaphysical conclusions and the claims of the materialists deserve careful study, not only because he himself often calls attention to them, but because he consciously undertook to develop a metaphysics that would be a conclusive answer to materialism.’ Anderson, ‘Editor’s Introduction,’ in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 54.

in functioning order.¹⁸ Their course in space and time were not the mechanistic transferrals of inertia assumed by pre-Human causality, but were the result of God's direct and immediate action. By what means Edwards got there logically and whether his arguments were valid are legitimate questions, but they lie somewhat outside the scope of this discussion.¹⁹ Our main concern is to understand what he believed such deductions, if valid, could reveal about God.

Among other items, Edwards drew the following two significant corollaries from his atomic speculations:

Corol. 15. Hence we see what's that we call the laws of nature in bodies, to wit: *the stated methods of God's acting with respect to bodies*, and the stated conditions of the alteration of the manner of his acting. *Corol. 16.* Hence we learn that *there is no such thing as mechanism*, if that word is taken to be that whereby bodies act each upon other, purely and properly by themselves.²⁰

In other words, if we reason rightly about nature and follow necessary deductions, we will come to a conclusion precisely opposite of what Hobbes and the Deists thought. They imagined that science revealed a universe of autonomous machinery, operating independently and everlastingly according to fixed laws of nature such as inertia. As Edwards was intensely aware, this constituted an unacceptable relegation of God to the distant role of clockmaker. Edwards' counter-proposal was that good physics actually taught that the universe is the moment-by-moment display of God's 'acting with respect to bodies.' There is thus 'no such thing as mechanism,' only God and his effects. The content of this revelation was perhaps basic—God exists as Creator, and necessarily continues to actively govern the universe—but in the context of the Enlightenment milieu in which Edwards wrote, this was a hugely important statement to be made.²¹

¹⁸ Edwards, *Works Vol. 6*, p. 214; emphasis mine.

¹⁹ For his part, Anderson thinks Edwards' atomic theory was flawed even by the physics of the day.

²⁰ Edwards, *Works Vol. 6*, p. 216.

²¹ Amongst other aims accomplished by this manoeuvre, Edwards was concerned to stave off the inevitable ethical breakdown he saw implied by a mechanistic universe (see *The Nature of True Virtue* in *Works Vol. 8*). Edwards' concerns were not without basis: 'Contemporary theories of human behavior have been fashioned after the deterministic model of classical physics in that human behavior is considered the product of antecedent events. Each psychological event is viewed as fully determined by its antecedent, in the same manner as physical events are by theirs. Under this view, it is entirely natural for a criminal to act as he does, since his criminality is a natural product of prior events. Punishment becomes inappropriate...' G. Roy Sumpter, 'Crime, Individual Culpability and Punishment,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (1973), pp. 223-27.

Edwards was not, incidentally, alone among eighteenth century philosophers in either his approach to the theological use of physics or in some of his conclusions. Here is a quotation from Leibniz's 'Monadology' written in 1714:

For everything has been regulated in things, once for all, with as much order and agreement as possible; the supreme wisdom and goodness cannot act except with perfect harmony. The present is great with the future; the future could be read in the past; the distant is expressed in the near. One could learn the beauty of the universe in each soul if one could unravel all that is rolled up in it but that develops perceptibly only with time.²²

Notice how Leibniz thinks that 'the supreme wisdom and goodness cannot act except with perfect harmony,' Edwardsean-sounding words if there ever were. As for the notion of extrapolating the past, present and future of the universe from the evidence to be found in a single entity (in Edwards' case, an atom instead of a monad), here is the American colonial writing a decade later:

'Tis only for want of sufficient accurateness, strength and comprehension of mind, that from the motion of any one particular atom we can't tell all that ever has been, [all] that now is in the whole extent of the creation (as to quantity of matter, figure, bulk and motion, distance), and everything that ever shall be. *Corol.* What room for improvement of reason is there, for angels and glorified minds!²³

It does not appear that Edwards had read Leibniz on this point. Rather, it would seem that similar presuppositions about the nature of the universe led to similar conclusions. In any case, Edwards' theory that a perfected mind could discern '...all that ever has been, [all] that now is in the whole extent of the creation...and everything that ever shall be' from a single atom illustrates the extent to which he conceived of the universe as minutely interconnected and brimming with harmonious revelatory content waiting to be interpreted.

3. Harmony in Nature

At this point we pause to consider an Edwardsean concept that holds great significance for this study as a whole: harmony. Harmony for Edwards describes the nature of beauty or 'excellency' as consisting in symmetry or mutual agreement.²⁴

²² Leibniz, 'The Monadology' paragraph 13, in Leroy E. Loemaker, ed., *Philosophical Papers and Letters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 640.

²³ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 272 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 374.

²⁴ See Edwards, 'The Mind' entry 1 in *Works Vol. 6*, pp. 332-338.

Harmonies may be simple or complex, physical or spiritual, but the paradigm of harmony is to be found ‘...among the persons of the Trinity, the supreme harmony of all.’²⁵ As the manifestation of Trinitarian communication, the physical universe exhibits harmony illustrated on the macroscopic scale by the solar system:

The beauty of the world consists wholly of sweet mutual consents, either within itself, or with the Supreme Being. [...] This beauty is peculiar to natural things, it surpassing the art of man. Thus there is the resemblance of a decent trust, dependence and acknowledgment in the planets continually moving round the sun, receiving his influences by which they are made happy, bright and beautiful, a decent attendance in the secondary planets, an image of majesty, power, glory and beneficence in the sun in the midst of all.²⁶

Edwards’ description of ‘the beauty of the world’ explains how harmony operates at a couple of levels. At one level, the world is simply beautiful because of the symmetries ‘within itself.’ At another, there is an agreement with spiritual things that surpasses ‘the art of man,’ seen in how the planets are made ‘bright and beautiful’ by their faithful revolving around the sun.

Edwards thought that beholding the beauty of the natural universe would naturally lead one to recognise the spiritual beauty of its creator:

When we see beautiful airs of look and gesture, we naturally think the mind that resides within is beautiful. We have all the same, and more, reason to conclude the spiritual beauty of Christ from the beauty of the world; for all the beauties of the universe so as immediately result from the efficiency of Christ, as a cast of an eye or a smile of the countenance depends on the efficiency of the human soul.²⁷

Just as a beautiful countenance leads one to believe there is a beautiful mind behind it, so a beautiful universe should lead one to think about the ‘spiritual beauty of Christ’ who stands behind it. There is therefore immense theological and apologetic potential in demonstrating the beauty or harmony in nature. Edwards leveraged this potential in his scientific work, seeking ‘To shew how all nature consists in things being precisely according to strict rules of justice and *harmony*.’²⁸

²⁵ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 182 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 328-329.

²⁶ Edwards, ‘Beauty of the World’ in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 305.

²⁷ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 185 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 330; emphasis mine.

²⁸ Edwards, ‘Things to be Considered’ (Long Series) entry 15 in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 231.

4. Edwards' Approach to Science

Could we, however, consider Edwards' project as 'real' science in the sense of the disinterested and open-ended observation of nature? Such a question merely begs the larger question of the nature of scientific, of course, but it is perhaps worth entertaining here as a means of getting at the way Edwards' theology of revelation functioned. One of the notes he made to himself on the cover-leaf of his scientific notebook provides a glimpse into his self-conscious method of operation:

Lest I may mention a great many things, and places of Scripture, that the world will judge but frivolous reasons for the proof of what I drive at, not to mention such as I fear it of as what I depend on for proof, but to bring 'em in so that the force of reasons will naturally and unavoidably be brought to the mind of the reader.²⁹

This interesting quote indicates a couple of items worthy of our attention. First, we notice how far advanced along the modernist road Edwards perceived early eighteenth century learned culture to be. He is concerned that 'the world' will consider things such as scriptural exegesis to be 'frivolous reasons' for his theories. They might even suspect ('as I fear it') that these are what really stood behind Edwards' argument all along, implying that the culture found such arguments either invalid or unconvincing. This window into Edwards' mind also highlights—as well as perhaps helps to explain—his apologetic concern in his scientific writings. The literate world has some definite prejudices against biblically derived conceptions of reality, and Edwards is acutely aware of them. But rather than a frontal attack on these presuppositions, he wants to play by their rules at this point, or at least appear to be doing so. He does not share the anti-Scriptural bias of his audience, but he thinks he can win them over through the 'force of reasons' that are in accord with their standards of rationality.

If we take these remarks to be indicative of what stood behind Edwards' science, is it a legitimate approach? According to Edwards, 'the world' thought that science should come with empty hands, looking for what the data could teach them under the light of human reason. The Bible was either basically erroneous (the more radical position held by the avant-garde) or just functionally irrelevant to the discussion (the perceived consensus to which Edwards was likely responding) and thus excluded. Religious bias, or any bias, was antithetical to the good scientist, whose purpose was nothing more or less than to determine factual statements about

²⁹ Edwards, 'Cover-Leaf Memoranda' in *Works Vol. 6*, pp. 194-195.

the material universe. Anderson wants us to be ‘wary of leaping to the conclusion that Edwards’ scientific efforts were prejudiced by the doctrine of his Calvinist theology.’³⁰ But *of course* it was prejudiced. If Edwards is to be judged by secular Enlightenment standards of what science ought to be, then Edwards’ work was certainly not science, and could only constitute a mockery in its attempt to pass itself off as such.³¹

Now we might note in passing that science has never actually conformed to this conception of the disinterested and open-ended observation of nature, as Kant would predict and as Kuhn has shown conclusively to be the case.³² But more importantly, Edwards never claimed to believe such naïve fiction. His theology of revelation taught that all the media of revelation were inherently harmonious and coherent. Edwards thus genuinely believed that an unbiased look at nature (which was in effect, a *correctly biased* look, possible only for the regenerate in the final analysis³³) would reach the same larger conclusions as theology derived exclusively from Biblical exegesis. This is precisely the point seen in his agenda for the ‘Rational Account.’³⁴ No doubt, Edwards’ science inevitably confirmed what he already knew, if not in detail then at least in gist. As Perry Miller remarked in his inimitable style, ‘...Edwards went to nature and experience, not in search of the possible, but of the given, of that which cannot be controverted, of that to which reason has access only through perception and pain, that of which logic is the servant and from which dialectic receives its premises.’³⁵ But this assurance of eventual congruence of knowledge did not imply that he could not engage in genuine science; in theory at least, the evidence would end up where he wanted to go without any need to force it.

³⁰ Anderson, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 50.

³¹ ‘The whole thing is to be something of a dialectical game, and the very first rule he registers is: ‘Try not only to silence, but to gain.’ This is hardly what we commonly think of the scientific attitude.’ Clarence H. Faust, ‘Jonathan Edwards as a Scientist’ *American Literature* 1, pp. 398-399.

³² See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

³³ See Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 1 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 197.

³⁴ In his planned great work of apologetic theology entitled ‘A Rational Account of the Main Doctrines of the Christian Religion Attempted,’ Edwards wanted to show ‘how all arts and sciences, the more they are perfected, the more they issue in divinity, and coincide with it, and appear to be as parts of it.’ Edwards, ‘Outline of a Rational Account’ in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 397.

³⁵ Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 46.

Edwards did, however, plan in his notebook to conceal his internal procedures from the audience of his science, and to appear as if he were proceeding only according to the canons of Enlightenment rationality. He claimed to do so to combat his readers' existing contrary biases, but of course the ends do not necessarily justify the means of such subterfuge. Yet it must be emphasized that Edwards' planned 'The Rational Account' never saw the light of day. And since none of the examples we have of his published polemical or apologetic works actually follow such a procedure, it seems that Edwards eventually decided against it. What we do in fact find in virtually all of Edwards' published works is the frankly stated coexistence of evidence derived from reason with prior commitment to Scripture.³⁶

Edwards' theology of revelation requires that good science must always confirm special revelation. As a media of God's unitary revelation, it can do no other. However, it is important to recognise that Edwards also went beyond asserting the mere factual coincidence of Scripture and science. His writings imply that any science *that does not begin* from a foundation in God's special revelation is very much disadvantaged at the fundamental level. Science *should* arrive at the same larger conclusions as taught in Scripture, but failing to make use of this inherently clearer revelation provided by God greatly diminishes the likelihood that it can do so in practise. But at an even deeper level, Edwards reminds us that the proper use of science issues not only in true statements of fact, but also in an appreciation of God's glory as displayed in the given phenomenon. What is the highest aim of natural science? It is not to make our lives easier through practical advances, the course set by fellow American and contemporary Benjamin Franklin. Rather, in keeping with the 'end' of creation and the tri-dimensional nature of revelation, it is to bring us into a knowing, loving and joyful worship of our God.

III. Nature as the Express Apprehension of the Divine

We turn now to Edwards' reflections on nature as the 'mystical' or express apprehension of the divine. By this we mean the experience of nature not as interpreted by rational reflection as in natural philosophy, nor as interpreted as types for something else as in typology, but, as a relatively immediate communication of

³⁶ An example of this occurs in the conclusion to Edwards' formidable *Freedom of the Will*, where, after demonstrating the incoherence of the Arminian position on philosophical grounds, he underscores his prior commitment to scriptural evidence. See Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* in *Works Vol. 1*.

God's presence and/or attributes.³⁷ Such experiences are related in the 'Personal Narrative,' and perhaps the best way to proceed is to simply quote at length the most sustained example. Edwards is here recounting his experiences in the immediate aftermath of his conversion, and has just concluded a conversation with his father about spiritual matters:

And when the discourse was ended, I walked abroad alone, in a solitary place in my father's pasture, for contemplation. And as I was walking there, and looked up on the sky and clouds; there came into my mind, a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express. I seemed to see them both in a sweet conjunction: majesty and meekness joined together: it was a sweet and gentle, and holy majesty; and also a majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high, and great, and holy gentleness.

After this my sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of everything was altered: there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. I often used to sit and view the moon, for a long time; and so in the daytime, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things: in the meantime, singing forth with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer. And scarce anything, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lighting....I felt God at the first appearance of a thunderstorm. And used to take the opportunity at such times, to fix myself to view the clouds, and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder: which often times was exceeding entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God.³⁸

There are a number of points to be noticed in this passage.³⁹ One is the *novelty* of the experience. This was obviously not the first time Edwards had seen the sky or flowers. But now, under the transforming influence of regeneration, the appearance of these things was 'altered.' Edwards now had the ability to perceive something that was presumably always there, but left unappreciated: the communication of

³⁷ As previously noted, Edwards does not think there is any truly immediate (non-mediated) apprehension of God. See Edwards, 'Miscellany' 777 in *Works Vol. 18*, pp. 427-434.

³⁸ Edwards, 'Personal Narrative' in *Works Vol. 16*, pp. 793-794.

³⁹ See the discussion on the reliability and theological usefulness of the 'Personal Narrative' below in Chapter 6. In sum, the 'Narrative' can at the very least be taken to provide an account of what Edwards thought *should* happen to the regenerate, and is therefore of great theological significance.

God's glory permeating nature. And moreover, over the passage of time, this '... sense of divine things gradually increased.' God is gradually reversing the noetic effects of sin that had previously inhibited the full recognition of revelatory content in nature, removing the scales to permit a progressively greater comprehension.

And then there is there is the *ineffability* of the affectional content of the experience. He was taking in things that, at one level, he knew '...not how to express.' It seems to be a common feature of mystical experience that certain aspects of the communication, particularly at the emotional level, are simply beyond the capacity of human language.⁴⁰ One must add immediately, however, that Edwards has just said virtually the same thing regarding his experience reading the written Word of God: 'The whole book of Canticles used to be pleasant to me, and I used to be much in reading it, about that time; and found from time to time an inward sweetness, that would carry me away in my contemplations. This I know not how to express.'⁴¹ So ineffability is not something particular to natural revelation as inherently inarticulate; it is rather indicative of the overwhelming affectional response to close communion with God, whatever the media.

On the other hand, there is also the *intelligibility* of the experience. Edwards may not have been able to explain everything precisely ('a sweet sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, that I know not how to express'), but there was enough there for him to make a passable attempt: 'I seemed to see them both in a sweet conjunction: majesty and meekness joined together: it was a sweet and gentle, and holy majesty; and also a majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high, and great, and holy gentleness.' Here is a conjoining of concepts that do not seem to go together in terms of bare logic intermingled with affectional content, an example perhaps of why Edwards could never have been satisfied with an understanding of revelation that could not account for such Trinitarian complexity.⁴²

Read in isolation, Edwards' 'Personal Narrative' could sound almost like Romantic poetry. Indeed, the possibility of Edwards either influencing or partially

⁴⁰ See, for example, St. Teresa: 'But as to what I then felt, I do not know where to begin, if I were to describe it; it is utterly inexplicable...I cannot see how it is possible to describe it.' St. Teresa, 'A Vision of Hell' in Paul De Jaeger, ed., *An Anthology of Mysticism*, (London: Burns & Oates, 1977), p. 85.

⁴¹ Edwards, 'Personal Narrative' in *Works Vol. 16*, p. 793.

⁴² Such a statement, while superficially reconcilable with Avihu Zakai's interpretation of Edwards having a *theologia gloriae*, would seem at another level to accord with a *theologia crucis*. See Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 72.

anticipating the American Transcendental movement has occurred to students of this movement.⁴³ But would Edwards really have been at home at Walden Pond? For a small sampling of the Transcendentalist agenda, consider this emblematic sentence from Emerson's famous Divinity School address: 'But now the priest's Sabbath *has lost the splendour of nature*; it is unlovely; we are glad when it is done; we can make, we do make, even sitting in our pews, a far better, holier, sweeter, for ourselves.'⁴⁴ We find in these sentiments elements both of basic continuity and of real discontinuity with Edwards. Emerson, reacting against the stifling sterility of Enlightenment religion, wanted to re-establish the individual, personal connection with the divine, primarily through the contemplation of nature. At this level, such sentiments would find some degree of resonance with Edwards' 'Personal Narrative,' and Edwards would be sympathetic to Emerson's aesthetic categories of evaluation. At a deeper level, however, Transcendentalism was but a continuation of the same Enlightenment project Edwards fought so fiercely against; the project of putting the individual human at the centre of the universe, though now in the guise of the mystic rather than of the philosopher/scientist. Even within the quotation above, it is clear that this agenda is something Edwards would have rejected out of hand. Edwards' account, while mystical in some sense, is radically theocentric.⁴⁵ Thus, rather than any real anticipation, Harold P. Simonson has rightly concluded that there was actually an antithesis between Edwards' Christianity and Emerson's 'romantic mysticism' vying for predominance in the nineteenth century American soul.⁴⁶ One can only lament the fact that the stuffy formalism passing for Christianity against which Emerson framed his attack had not been more indelibly marked by Jonathan Edwards' own beautifully balanced appropriation of nature.

Finally, a brief word should be said about mystical tendencies in Edwards beyond the specifically Romantic. Going back to A. V. G. Allen, interpreters have seen a strain of 'intuitive mysticism' in Edwards' religious epistemology, whereby 'all who accept the truth, that divine things are known to be divine because humanity

⁴³ See for instance Perry Miller, 'Jonathan Edwards to Emerson,' *The England Quarterly*, Vol. 13 no. 4 (Dec 1940), pp. 589-617.

⁴⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Divinity School Address* 1838 [cited 21 April 2006], available from <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>; emphasis mine.

⁴⁵ Edwards' theocentricity is the specific thesis of Michael J. McClymond's *Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), but is assumed elsewhere.

⁴⁶ See Harold P. Simonson, *Radical Discontinuities: American Romanticism and Christian Consciousness* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983).

is endowed with the gift of direct vision into divinity, are accepting what Edwards proclaimed.⁴⁷ And going back to Clyde Holbrook, others have pointed out that such tendencies must be understood only in light of everything else Edwards said.⁴⁸ Far more recently, Sang Hyun Lee has produced a concise statement of what this correct understanding constitutes:

The new ‘sensible knowledge’ that the Holy Spirit makes possible is not some new information separate from the human words in Scripture but rather a new apprehension of what already was in Scripture. Finite, creaturely ideas, including concrete ideas of the physical universe, are all necessary ‘stuff’ in and through which the transcendent is experienced and known....Edwards is not a ‘mystic,’ if the term denote one who contends that the true knowledge of ultimate reality involves a departure from the sensible and mundane.⁴⁹

Edwards’ apprehension of the divine in nature is rooted precisely in the sensible experience of a ‘mundane’ universe inherently embedded with revelatory content.⁵⁰

In summary, the *Personal Narrative* is a striking portrait of Edwards’ use of nature in the ‘mystical’ (as qualified above) mode. Like all other media of divine revelation, there is objective content waiting to be apprehended by the regenerate observer. This content is both ineffable in some respects but also intelligible in others. And although Edwards’ theology of revelation indeed made room for the main things the mystically inclined would like to affirm, particularly by appropriating nature and non-noetic content, his stress on Trinitarian *harmony* throughout the media of revelation had the effect of reigning in the usual excesses.

IV. Nature as Types.

Typology was once regarded—when it was considered at all—as an arcane hermeneutic connected with allegorical interpretation, lying alongside it in deserved obscurity. But as Hans Frei reminds us, typology is actually ‘...a natural extension of literal interpretation,’ one that once dominated orthodox hermeneutics.⁵¹

Typology was particularly important to Edwards, and accordingly, there has arisen a

⁴⁷ Clyde A. Holbrook, ‘Jonathan Edwards and His Detractors,’ *Theology Today* 10 (1953), p. 391.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Sang Hyun Lee, ‘God’s Relation to the World,’ in Sang Hyun Lee, ed., *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 69.

⁵⁰ Of course, Edwards thought that our ideas were in any case communicated to us by God ‘immediately,’ but that sensible reality concurred with our ideas. See above, chapter 1.

⁵¹ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 2.

host of scholarship dealing with this subject.⁵² The native province of typology was in the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, where it identified various cultic elements as intentional ‘types’ pointing to Christ or other ‘antitypes’, in keeping with the New Testament writers’ own hermeneutic. Scripture is but one medium of revelation, however, and ‘In Edwards’ hands...typology took on a broadened significance that comprehended not only Scripture but also nature and history.’⁵³ While it is unclear as to exactly how much an innovation Edwards’ use of typology really comprised, Anderson and others believe that Edwards knowingly departed from the mainstream of his tradition by finding types in natural phenomena not covered by Scripture.⁵⁴

Edwards’ formulated his robust approach to typology early on in his career, in ‘Miscellany’ 362:

For indeed the whole outward creation, which is but the shadows of beings, is so made as to represent spiritual things. It might be demonstrated by the wonderful agreement in thousands of things, much of the same kind as is between the types of the Old Testament and their antitypes, and by spiritual things being so often and continually compared with them in the Word of God. And it’s agreeable to God’s wisdom that it should be so, that the inferior and shadowy parts of his works should be made to represent those things that are more real and excellent, spiritual and divine, to represent the things that immediately concern himself and the highest parts of his work.⁵⁵

⁵² See, for example, Conrad Cherry, ‘Symbols of Spiritual Truth: Jonathan Edwards as Biblical Interpreter,’ *Interpretation* 39, no. II (1985), pp. 263-71; Nelson D. Kloosterman, ‘The Use of Typology in Post-Canonical Salvation History: An Orientation to Jonathan Edwards’ *A History of the Work of Redemption*, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 14 (2003), pp. 59-96; Janice Knight, ‘Learning the Language of God: Jonathan Edwards and the Typology of Nature,’ *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991), pp. 531-51; Mason I. Lowance, ‘Images or Shadows of Divine Things: The Typology of Jonathan Edwards,’ *Early American Literature* 5, no. 1 (1970), pp. 141-81; Kenneth P. Minkema, ‘The Other Unfinished ‘Great Work’: Jonathan Edwards, Messianic Prophecy, And ‘The Harmony of the Old and New Testament,’ in *Jonathan Edwards’s Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996) pp. 52-65; and William J. Wainwright, ‘Jonathan Edwards and the Language of God,’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48, no. D (1980), pp. 519-30.

⁵³ Anderson, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 11*, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Anderson holds this view despite his familiarity with Cotton Mather, whose *Agricola* (1727) might seem to constitute a precedent for Edwards’ typology. Anderson’s case rests upon his distinction between the *metaphorical* usage allowed by Mather and others for phenomena not designated as types in Scripture and Edwards’ explicitly *typological* usage, and upon Edwards’ careful defence of his typology from presumed detractors in the ‘Types’ notebook. See Anderson, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 11*, pp. 6-33.

⁵⁵ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 362 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 434.

Consider the import of Edwards' claims here. We are not merely permitted to use nature to provide occasional sermon illustrations; nature is itself and in its entirety nothing less than God's intentional representation of spiritual reality. Notice also Edwards' reference to the 'wonderful agreement' between type and antitype, which reminds us of why Edwards was so drawn to the use of typology. Typological exegesis of nature—as with Scripture, as with history—allowed Edwards to demonstrate the beautiful, Trinitarian harmony he believed to permeate all reality. Finally, we see how Edwards' ontological hierarchy is expressed, whereby the 'real,' spiritual things are represented by the 'shadowy' visible creation.

Edwards devoted a sizable notebook exclusively to types in nature.⁵⁶ Immediately before the first entry in this notebook, Edwards places the following words: 'Under the head of Creation.' Given Edwards' usual care in organization, it is perhaps significant that he conceived of his catalogue of types in nature as a subheading under the doctrine of creation. This is further confirmation of how his typology was interwoven with his doctrine of creation at the fundamental level. His 'Types' notebook, the fascinating details of which unfortunately shall not detain us here, merely represent the outworking of a doctrine of creation in which material things exist only to serve as revelatory media in God's project of self-revelation. Specific phenomena were thus always pregnant with meaning. As William J. Wainwright put it, 'A world in which things resemble one another, in which lower species imitate higher species, and the physical shadows forth the moral, is the sort of world in which types and emblems are to be expected.'⁵⁷

In brief, Edwards thought that the entire creation was embedded with typological meaning waiting to be interpreted by those who were enabled to know the 'language of God.'

V. Natural Revelation and Natural Theology

Most aspects of Edwards' apologetic agenda were largely driven by the contemporary Deist threat, but this is particularly so in the case of his response to natural theology. So to better understand Edwards on this point, we first sketch out something of what he was working against. We shall then explain Edwards' own use for natural revelation before engaging with some recent scholarship on the issue.

⁵⁶ See Edwards, 'Types' notebook in *Works Vol. 11*.

⁵⁷ William J. Wainwright, 'Jonathan Edwards and the Language of God,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (1980), p. 522.

1. Edwards' Reply to Tindal

Matthew Tindal (1657-1733) was the most influential Deist thinker of Edwards' time, and Edwards was primarily responding to him on the issue of natural theology.⁵⁸ Tindal purported to be merely stating the fuller implications of what was already widely accepted in principle among prominent Church of England figures—the title of his major work *Christianity as Old as the Creation* was indeed taken from the words of an Anglican Bishop⁵⁹—and this reflected more than a modicum of truth. Archbishop Tillotson's statements on nature and reason were so useful to the Deist position as to make him one of the most widely quoted figures in freethinking literature.⁶⁰ It could in fact be argued that some forms of Deism were nothing other than an outworking of rationalist tendencies present in Latitudinarian epistemology.⁶¹ In any case, it was in the doctrine of revelation that Tindal sought to establish his foundation for deism, and the primacy of natural theology was his *pièce de résistance*. The character 'A', representing Tindal in this dialogue, declares

I think, too great a stress can't be laid on natural religion, which as I take it, differs not from revealed, but in the manner of its being communicated: the one being the internal, as the other the external revelation of the same unchangeable Will of a Being...⁶²

To this, 'B', the thoughtful Anglican Tindal is trying to win over, replies 'Surely, sir, this must be extremely heterodox. Can you believe, that *Natural* and *revealed* religion differ in nothing but the Manner of their being conveyed to us?'⁶³ Tindal's purpose here is to diffuse knee-jerk reactions, and when developed a bit more, Tindal's proposal begins to sound more reasonable to 'B': these media of revelation come from the same source, and no doubt they must contain the same information necessary for right relationship with God. If this is what God already gave in natural religion, 'A' asks 'Can revelation, I say, add anything to a religion thus absolutely

⁵⁸ Thomas Chubb has the dubious honour of being the most quoted Deist overall in Edwards' notebooks, but on the subject of natural theology, Edwards' was responding to Tindal directly and to Chubb only indirectly.

⁵⁹ 'The Religion of the Gospel, is the true original Religion of Reason and Nature... And its Precepts declarative of that original Religion, which was as old as the Creation,' quoting a sermon by Bishop Sherlock of Bangor. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (London: 1730).

⁶⁰ See J. O'Higgins, 'Archbishop Tillotson and the Religion of Nature,' *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s.: 24, no. 1 (1973), pp. 123-142.

⁶¹ Or *vice versa*. Both were surely manifestations of an age universally 'bent upon a rational religion.' Thomas Sprat, 1667, quoted in Robert E. Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 31.

⁶² Tindal, *Christianity as Old as Creation*, p. 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

perfect, universal, and immutable?’⁶⁴ Revelation is simply superfluous to natural religion. From this foundation, Tindal builds his theology from nature alone.

Edwards responded at length to Tindal’s case for natural theology in ‘Miscellany’ 1337. His first point is to point out the gap between objective validity and subjective sufficiency:

Tindal’s main argument against the need of any revelation is that the law of nature is absolutely perfect. But how weak and impertinent is this arguing that, because the law of nature...is perfect, that therefore the light of nature is sufficient. ...how far is this from having any reference to that question whether we have by mere nature, without instruction, all that light and advantage that we need clearly and fully to know what is right, and all that is needful for us to be and to do in our circumstances as sinners, etc., in order to the forgiveness of sin, the favor of God and our own happiness. What according to the nature of things is fittest and best may be most perfect, and yet our natural discerning and knowledge of this may be most imperfect.⁶⁵

Yes, the ‘light of nature’ might be ‘perfect’ as Tindal claims, but we in ‘our circumstances as sinners, etc.’ are definitely not perfect observers of this light. In our situation, we need something more explicit than what nature provides.

There is moreover a crucial distinction between the duties of religion as we stand as God’s creatures and the duties of religion as we stand as guilty sinners. Edwards thinks that nature is in fact insufficient for *either* kind of religion:

In order the more clearly to judge of this matter of the sufficiency of the light of nature, to know what is necessary to be known of religion in order to their happiness, we must consider what are the things that must be known in order to this, which are these two things: 1. the religion of nature...as creatures; 2. the religion of a sinner, or the religion and duties proper and necessary for us considering our state as depraved and guilty creatures, having incurred the displeasure of our Creator. As to the former, ’tis manifest from fact that nature alone is not sufficient for the discovery of the religion of nature... No, nor does it appear to have proved sufficient so much in a single instance. And as to the latter, viz. the religion of a sinner, or the duties proper and necessary for us as depraved, guilty and offending creatures, ’tis most evident the light of nature cannot be sufficient for our information by any means, or in any sense whatsoever...it affords no possibility of it.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 1337 in *Works Vol. 23*, p. 342.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 344-345.

In Edwards' estimation, natural revelation has never 'proved sufficient so much in a single instance' even for our religion as creatures. As for the religion of a sinner, it is obvious to Edwards that the light of nature 'affords no possibility' of being sufficient. In sum, Edwards thinks that humans are insufficient as observers of nature, that nature has proven to be insufficient to guide creaturely religion, and that nature is categorically incompetent to furnish sinners with the gospel.

2. Edwards' Use

As we have seen, Edwards denies the possibility of salvific knowledge of God through nature alone. But as we have also seen, Edwards holds significant possibilities for the regenerate appropriation of natural revelation, even to the point of being able to hear 'the voice of God' in nature.⁶⁷ We consider now Edwards' more direct statements on the use of natural revelation.

First, we should note that in common with Calvin and the mainstream Reformed tradition, Edwards thinks that natural revelation is sufficient to condemn the unbelievers: 'They have light sufficient for that judgment and condemnation which they shall be the subjects of. For their condemnation shall proceed no further than so far as to be proportioned to their light.'⁶⁸ Those who remain obstinate under greater 'light'—as, say, those in officially Christian nations—will receive greater condemnation, but no one is so removed from God's creation as to be excused.

In the positive direction, we have discussed how Edwards thinks that science and typology provide tools for interpreting the riches available to the regenerate in natural revelation. In fact, the intelligent and affectional reception of God's self-communication in nature is precisely why the creation exists:

'Tis most certain that if there were not intelligent beings in the world, all the world would be without any end at all. For senseless matter, in whatever excellent order it is placed, would be useless if there were no intelligent beings at all, neither God nor others; for what would it be good for? So certainly, senseless matter would be altogether useless if there were no intelligent being but God, for God could neither receive good himself nor communicate good. What would this vast universe of matter, placed in such excellent order and governed by such excellent rules, be good for, if there were no intelligence that could know anything of it?⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 1340 in *Works Vol 23*, p. 374.

⁶⁸ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 1338 in *Works Vol 23*, p. 355.

⁶⁹ Edwards, 'Miscellany' gg in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 185.

Edwards asserts in the strongest language that, in and of itself, the natural universe would have no *raison d'être*; its purpose is to facilitate God's self-communication. But this is only possible given the existence of intelligent creatures to recognise the beauty of God's work in creation. Edwards continues; 'Wherefore it necessarily follows that intelligent beings are the end of the creation, that their end must be to behold and admire the doings of God, and magnify him for them, and to contemplate his glories in them.' The creation exists for the purpose of intelligent beings, and intelligent beings exist for the purpose of glorifying God in the noetic, affectional and beatific appreciation of his works.

Only after saying all this can Edwards get around to the original subject of his entry, which had to do with 'religion':

Wherefore religion must be the end of the creation, the great end, the very end. If it were not for this, all those vast bodies we see ordered with so excellent skill, so according to the nicest rules of proportion, according to such laws of gravity and motion, would be all vanity, or good for nothing with no purpose at all. For religion is the very business, the noble business of intelligent beings, and for this end God has placed us on this earth. If it were not for men, this world would be altogether in vain, with all the curious workmanship of it and accoutrements about it.⁷⁰

So it turns out that Edwards has some use for a 'natural religion' after all. Religion is indeed the 'end of the creation.' The very purpose of the entire natural universe, and of all the human beings that inhabit it, is to participate in a religion that contemplates the 'curious workmanship' and 'accoutrements' of God's glorious creation. Humanity exists to glorify God by recognizing God's work in creation, and as Edwards goes on to say, this function necessarily continues for eternity.⁷¹ Characteristically, Edwards responds to the error of natural religion by constructing a theology that, while emphatically denying its errors, goes far beyond the Deists in affording nature the noblest of ultimate purposes.

3. Miller and Butler

Having discussed some of Edwards' theology of natural revelation, perhaps it would now be useful to discuss a relevant debate in the secondary literature as a means of consolidation. As was mentioned earlier, Perry Miller held there was a

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

radical discontinuity between Edwards and his predecessors on the status he granted to natural revelation, which was to elevate ‘nature to a level of authority coequal with revelation.’⁷² And as with so many of Miller’s colourful but less than guarded statements, this assertion has been subjected to scrutiny. Diana Butler, in her critique of Miller, makes a necessary correction in one direction but her qualification further exposes the complexity of the problem:

If God’s glory is visible in nature, did Calvin or Edwards set nature next to Scripture as a separate form of revelation? The answer in both cases is no. If natural theology is an ability to arrive at a saving knowledge of God derived from creation, then neither Calvin nor Edwards promoted natural theology. However, in the theological context of both the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, most theologians believed that nature testified to God’s existence as Creator. Following Paul in Romans, both Calvin and Edwards assented to this limited use of natural revelation. Humanity is given enough knowledge of God through nature to make them responsible for their refusal to acknowledge and worship God. The deepest lessons of nature, however, are reserved for the regenerate.⁷³

Butler is no doubt correct in her assessment that natural theology *as an independent means of attaining saving knowledge* was utterly denied by both Calvin and Edwards. As we have seen, the emphatic refutation of this position was in fact a major item on Edwards’ anti-deist agenda. And Butler is possibly correct in saying that Miller did not fully understand Calvin on this point, and thus exaggerated the extent of Edwards’ discontinuity.⁷⁴ But Butler does not explain sufficiently how Edwards might have thought his strong statements against natural theology are to be reconciled with his statements that seemingly support Miller’s assertion, such as Edwards viewing ‘...shadows of divine things as the voice of God.’⁷⁵ This reconciliation is what I propose now to undertake.

The problem involves definition with regard to case. The term natural theology must be defined and used consistently, mindful that neither Calvin nor Edwards did this for us. We then must be careful to distinguish the *means* available (nature) and the *effects* of this revelation, with regard to the cases of unregenerate

⁷² Miller, ‘Introduction’ in Perry Miller, ed. *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), p. 28.

⁷³ Diana Butler, ‘God’s Visible Glory: The Beauty of Nature in the Thought of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards,’ *Westminster Theological Journal* 52, no. 1 (1990), p.22.

⁷⁴ It would seem to us that Edwards essentially constitutes a development of Calvin on this issue.

⁷⁵ Edwards, *Works Vol. 11*, p. 74.

(where it can only condemn) and regenerate minds (where it does much more). Returning to Butler's primary source of evidence in the Hebrews 5:12 sermon of 1739, Edwards says 'Indeed there is what is called natural religion or divinity. There are many truths concerning God, and our duty to him, which are evident by the light of nature.'⁷⁶ Here we have an affirmation of the *means* of natural revelation; God does in fact convey information about himself and even our duty to him (Tindal's main point) through nature. Edwards then explains its effects, or lack thereof, *with regard to the unregenerate*:

But Christian divinity, properly so called, is not evident by the light of nature; it depends on revelation. Such are our circumstances now in our fallen state, that nothing which it is needful for us to know concerning God, is manifest by the light of nature in the manner in which it is necessary for us to know it...⁷⁷

Notice how Edwards makes it clear that this is a condition involving 'our fallen state,' indicating that this condition need not obtain in all circumstances. Notice also Edwards' qualification that nature cannot inform fallen humanity 'in the manner in which it is necessary to know it,' thus preserving the underlying reality of nature's content while taking up this issue of its subjective perspicuity. Now in other places already cited, Edwards affirms the positive effects of natural revelation possible *with regard to the regenerate Christian*. Thus Edwards' statements can be reconciled simply with reference to the fact that they refer to radically different subjective circumstances. Butler may well have known this, but a clear statement of the matter was lost in her effort to refute Miller's thesis.

Let us now synthesise Edwards' position on natural revelation with respect to the Scriptures. For Edwards, natural revelation is, in various ways, less than, equal to and more than special revelation in the Scriptures. For unregenerate fallen humanity, natural revelation is *less* than special revelation, in that although it says enough to condemn, it can never lead to the things '...needful for us to know concerning God.'⁷⁸ For regenerate humanity, it is *equal* to special revelation, in that it confirms and illumines truths to be found in Scripture. But for them it is also in some sense *more* than special revelation, not that it reveals new truth but that the intelligent recognition and worshipful contemplation of God's works are indeed what biblical religion enjoins Christians to participate in. For Edwards, the appropriation

⁷⁶ Edwards, 'A Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth' sermon on Heb 5:12 in *Works Vol. 22*, p. 86.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

of natural revelation is not just a ‘nice to have’ rational confirmation of scriptural revelation but is in fact an essential part of our purpose for existence.

VI. Conclusion

Edwards mined the natural creation for revelatory treasure. He did so in ways that could only offend modern sensibilities—using his science as a vehicle to demonstrate what he already knew, and declaring that the deeper purpose of every feature in this ‘material’ world was to exhibit Trinitarian harmony and/or to serve as a type of the spiritual realm. And to a degree that might seem excessive even to the contemporary incumbents of his ecclesiastical tradition, Edwards made the Psalmist’s musings on the heavens declaring the glory of God his own vivid experience.

The profound aspect of Edwards’ thought on natural revelation was not in what he thought nature could teach us notionally but in how he thought this knowledge should function. He concurred with both Calvin and the Enlightenment religion he deplored that nature could teach us much about God. But with Calvin and against the Deists, he thought that this would afford the unregenerate nothing but condemnation. Things, however, were radically different for the regenerate. When Christians behold nature, joyfully recognising in all its glorious detail the work of God and entering into worship, they act in fulfilment of the very reason for the existence of the universe. This teaching was of course part and parcel of Edwards’ larger theology of revelation, wherein all reality serves as the noetic, affectional and beatific communication of God to intelligent creatures.

Religion since Edwards’ time has largely been a story of warfare between an increasingly isolated Christianity and an increasingly secularised scientific enterprise, as well as a persistent hostility between rationalistic and ‘mystical’ elements within Christianity. It might therefore be worth reconsidering whether Edwards’ all-encompassing vision might have something to contribute to the situation even today. We turn now to investigate more fully Edwards’ arguments for the necessity of special revelation.

Chapter 3

The Necessity of Special Revelation

‘And therefore we stand in the greatest necessity of a divine revelation.’

—Jonathan Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 837¹

I. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. Firstly, it provides a further counterbalance to the apparently boundless possibilities Edwards would seem to grant to general revelation.² Secondly, it advances this thesis’ historical sub-plot of Edwards’ campaign against hostile Enlightenment ideas, developed not only in terms of Deism but also in terms of John Locke. Thirdly and most importantly, it shows how Edwards’ distinctively Trinitarian theology of revelation made a difference in the way he carried out this campaign, as illustrated by his innovative arguments for the necessity of special revelation built around divine communicativeness.

As suggested by the discussion of Edwards’ use of nature in the preceding chapter, few gave more generous allowance for the possibilities of general revelation than did Jonathan Edwards. Not only did he seek to maintain a symbiotic alliance between science and religion—if indeed they could be seen as meaningfully separate endeavours at all—he believed he could demonstrate that all the main doctrines of the Christian faith were perfectly compatible with human reason.³ No doubt such sentiments sound overly optimistic if not naïve to the twenty-first century ear. However, this liberality regarding general revelation is only one aspect of his comprehensive and integrative project. In a no less ambitious manner, Edwards also insisted upon the absolute necessity of special revelation. If his lifelong warfare with the Deists and their allies had a central front, it was here at this crucial question of

¹ *Works Vol. 20*, p. 53

² This counterbalancing began with our discussion of natural theology, above chapter 2.

³ Ava Chamberlain describes Edwards’ planned ‘Rational Account’ thus: ‘...another of Edwards’ proposed titles for the treatise [was] “A Rational Account of Christianity, or, The Perfect Harmony between the Doctrines of the Christian Religion and Human Reason Manifested.” This formulation of the title describes more precisely the aims of the “Rational Account.” Edwards intended this treatise to be not simply a systematic theology but a demonstration of the rationality or reasonableness of Christian doctrine.’ Chamberlain, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 18* p. 25.

whether nature and reason were sufficient to bring people into right relationship with God. Edwards thus took to himself the difficult and *prima facie* contradictory task of affirming the almost unbounded extent of revelatory content in the ‘book of nature’ while also arguing for the absolute necessity of a supernatural Word of God.

Such a ‘both/and’ approach to thorny theological problems, perhaps a signature feature of Edwards’ thought, tended to breed in his formulations a creative insight that went beyond the superficial point at issue to the deeper, more basic concerns that lay behind them. His advocacy for the necessity of revelation could well be considered an example of this feature at work. The Deists thought that humans did not *need* information from special revelation because they have all the data they require from nature and reason. Like the other anti-Deist apologists of his time, Edwards was tireless in enumerating the ways in which natural reason is theoretically, or at least practically, inadequate for discovering true religion. But in another sense, Edwards agreed with the Deist premise that we may not *need* information from special revelation. In a paradigmatic application of the concept of divine communicativeness discussed in chapter one, Edwards affirmed that God is personal, relational and communicative, and this entire universe exists as nothing other than a structure for his communication to personal, relational and communicative intelligent beings.⁴ Whether or not we *need information* is entirely beside the point in this frame of reference; the point is that God is pleased to engage with us in *relational conversation*, much as people do with one another. This line of reasoning was for Edwards no mere *ad hoc* apologetic device, but a foundational aspect of reality rooted deep within the Trinity and in God’s purposes for creation.

Our discussion will focus on this relational/conversational model, the development of which should be considered Edwards’ key contribution to the doctrine of the necessity of special revelation. With this at the centre, the chapter below will consist of sections resembling concentric circles, either leading into this core or emanating from it. In order to set the stage for the significance of the relational/conversational model, we need to explore Edwards’ more conventional arguments for the necessity of revelation. And in order to understand these in their

⁴ I imply that Edwards already had the outlines of such theology in place prior to applying it to his apologetics. We might add that Edwards also developed aspects of his doctrine of revelation as an outgrowth of, or alongside, his apologetic. If so, Edwards follows an established pattern in the Christian tradition, which displays an ‘...intimate connection between the growth of apologetics, hermeneutics, theological method, and prolegomenon.’ Sebastian Rehnman, *Divine Discourse: The Theological Methodology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 16.

historical context, we shall sample some of the contemporary Deist writing that sought to make special revelation redundant. As we shall see, Edwards was working against a whole spectrum of Enlightenment thought, not only that of Deists but also that of figures operating under more mainstream auspices. This means that along with the predictable characters such as Chubb to whom Edwards explicitly addressed himself, we will examine evidence that Edwards' antagonist for his relational/conversational model may have been none other than John Locke. And although Edwards seems to have developed this concept largely on his own, there are some precursors in Reformed theology to be noted. Finally, we discuss the possible role of Edwards' defence of special revelation within his programme of planned master works of apologetic theology. However, we first need to place this subject within the overall context of Edwards' concerns, something facilitated by reference to the existing secondary literature. To this preliminary concern we now turn.

II. Signposts from the Literature

Edwards' defence of the necessity of special revelation has not perhaps attracted a level of scholarly interest proportionate to his considerable output on the subject, but neither has it been neglected. Reference to these relevant studies will provide us with some parameters to orient our discussion here.

In his study of Edwards' apologetics, Stephen J. Nichols points to the emphasis Edwards places on the necessity and authority of special revelation.⁵ Nichols reminds us that Edwards' arguments for the necessity of revelation in his 'Miscellany' notebooks were judged important enough to merit a prominent place in the original 1793 posthumous publication of selected entries.⁶ Moreover, if the sheer number of relevant entries is any guide to Edwards' own estimation, the necessity of revelation seems to occupy a position on his list of key subjects at least as high as some topics he personally brought to publication, such as free will or original sin.⁷

Douglas Sweeney, editor of the fourth and final volume of 'Miscellanies,' notices that this topic was also central to the concerns of the other authors Edwards appropriated in his later years.⁸ These authors came from theological positions ranging from non-conformity to Roman Catholicism, but Sweeney identifies their

⁵ Stephen J. Nichols, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), p. 41.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Approximately 67 of the roughly 1400 'Miscellanies' deal with the necessity of revelation.

common cause: 'If there was one concern that Edwards' major interlocutors shared in common, it was that modern thought promoted the neglect of revelation.'⁹ Edwards was thus far from alone in his concern to establish the necessity of special revelation.¹⁰

Ava Chamberlain provides a wealth of information on Edwards' apologetic for special revelation in relation to the 'Rational Account' project material located within the earlier 'Miscellanies,' and explains why it was so important:

Edwards intended the 'Rational Account' to be [a] transatlantic assault upon deism, which had as yet no vocal exponents in New England. Without retreating from Reformed orthodoxy, he systematically addresses in the 'Christian Religion' entries each of the elements of the deist critique. Those having the single title 'Christian Religion' generally consider the deists' principle claim, that supernatural revelation is superfluous to a purely rational religion.¹¹

The 'Rational Account' was to be Edwards' apologetic 'assault upon Deism.' We know already that Edwards saw the Deists as the main threat to the true faith in his day, and in Chamberlain's view, their 'principle claim' was that revelation was unnecessary. Putting these things together, it becomes clear why Edwards might have allocated such considerable output to this issue: it was the central tenet of the era's most dangerous enemies of Christianity.

With these parameters in place, Chamberlain then provides us with a valuable summary of Edwards' main arguments for the necessity of revelation located in the second 'Miscellany' volume:

In No. 544 Edwards maintains that if God exists it is 'unreasonable' to suppose 'that he should never speak.' Because it 'is a property of all intelligent beings, that God has made in his own image, to speak,' it is 'strange that any should imagine that the supreme intelligence should never speak.' His most common argument, however, is that revelation is necessary, for by means of it God has disclosed truths unavailable to human reason.¹²

⁸ *Volume 23* includes a large amount of material copied from contemporary authors as well as Edwards' original thoughts, both of which were intended to serve as grist for his planned master works which by then consisted of 'The History of the Work of Redemption' and 'The Harmony of the Old and New Testament.' See the discussion below in chapter 6.

⁹ Sweeney, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 23*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁰ The names of the authors Edwards quoted are to be found noted throughout *Works Vol. 23*.

¹¹ Chamberlain, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 27.

¹² *Ibid.*

Chamberlain thus identifies two basic categories of arguments. The first category of argument is what we have termed the relational/conversational model, predicated upon the nature of God and the doctrine of creation. The second, his ‘most common argument,’ is the inadequacy of human reason to find out all that is required for true religious knowledge. Although Chamberlain is speaking here only in terms of the ‘Miscellanies’ she edited, her categorisation would seem to apply to the entire set.

We lastly consider Gerald R. McDermott’s article ‘Jonathan Edwards, Deism, and the Mystery of Revelation,’ which comes closest to a dedicated discussion of our area of concern.¹³ McDermott includes sections on Edwards’ critique of Deist uses of ‘reason,’ the ‘law of nature’ and his defence of theological mystery as well as the necessity of special revelation.¹⁴ Of significance for us, McDermott deals with the relational/conversational model, summarizing a series on ‘Miscellanies’ on this theme stretching nearly the entirety of Edwards’ career:

Surely the Creator would want to communicate the purpose of creation to his intelligent creatures (Misc. 129). He made them to be perceiving and conscious spirits, and it is the nature of spirits to communicate by conversations (Misc. 204; Misc 749). It is reasonable that the Creator of history would want to explain the meaning and course of providence (Misc. 752). If he wanted his people to have true religion, reason would tell us that he would communicate to them his intentions (Misc. 1304).¹⁵

It should first be noticed that the span of entries McDermott references evince that this important element of Edwards’ apologetic was present from the beginning until the end of his career. If Edwards had a specific initial stimulus for this way of thinking, it must have occurred at an early date. Second, it is interesting that McDermott frames this category of argument in terms of being a rational apologetic: ‘reason itself told us.’ On the basic level, we see this as yet another example of Edwards using the very weapon his Enlightened enemies found such comfort in—reason—against them. At another level, we might notice that these do not sound like typical infallibalist philosophical proofs; all of the individual arguments listed refer to the *propriety* of God giving special revelation rather than any philosophic *necessity*. Nor are they exactly probabilistic proofs, although they perhaps come closer to these. Rather they say something like, ‘assuming what we know about him,

¹³ McDermott, ‘Jonathan Edwards, Deism, and the Mystery of Revelation.’ *Journal of Presbyterian History* 77, no. 4 (1999), pp. 211-224.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 211.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 212.

God would certainly (not ‘God would probably’ nor ‘God must’) give us special revelation.’

McDermott then points to the strangeness of Edwards’ company in using reason to prove the necessity of revelation:

On this, strangely enough, Edwards went part way with Locke and the Deists, all of whom claimed that reason can and must show if there is to be a revelation. Locke said that reason proves that the Bible is God’s revelation. Chubb and Matthew Tindal said that reason proved just the opposite. Edwards agreed with Locke, but denied that reason *must* prove revelation if revelation is to be accepted.¹⁶

The names of Locke and Chubb will reoccur in our discussion. For now, we need only recognize the import of McDermott’s distinction: Edwards thought that reason could and should prove the case for special revelation, but he parted company with Locke in thinking that it *had* to. Ultimately, Edwards did not share in the ‘tactical mistake’ that characterized mainstream eighteenth century apologetics, whereby Christians agreed to fight by the Enlightenment’s rules and, predictably, lost.¹⁷

III. Chubb

So we have a fairly good map of the territory provided by existing scholarship. Before we move on to look at some of Edwards’ arguments for the necessity of revelation first hand, let us take a moment to consider more fully the context and nature of the dilemma that confronted him. First of all, it is plain that Edwards needed to make his doctrine of revelation internally coherent. This was itself no mean feat. From a consideration of Edwards’ ontology—which, in sum, is that all reality is the continual manifestation of ideas resident in the divine mind¹⁸—one might form the impression that human observers should have all the data required to know true religion by the mere study of the universe. But as an orthodox theologian of the Reformed tradition, Edwards also held to the necessity of special revelation. This article of faith was no doubt heightened in its importance as he encountered the increasingly bold statements against this teaching being made in the heyday of Deism. We have already examined Tindal’s position on natural theology

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 213.

¹⁷ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 23.

¹⁸ See Edwards, ‘The Mind,’ in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 344.

in the context of Edwards' use of nature; we turn now to hear from Chubb, another of Edwards' chief antagonists on this issue.¹⁹

Thomas Chubb (1679-1747) was essentially a populariser of existing Deist doctrine. Chubb's main work on the issue at hand was *A Discourse Concerning Reason with Regard to Religion and Divine Revelation: Wherein It Is Shown That Reason Is, or Else That It Ought to Be, a Sufficient Guide in Matters of Religion*.²⁰ The book does as the long title suggests, making the simple but highly subversive point that human reason is sufficient to determine religious faith. Chubb's thesis is that mankind is universally accountable before God and therefore must have universal access to essential religious truth:

Man in his natural state, when destitute of divine revelation, is supposed to be an accountable creature, who is answerable to God for his actions, and who will be amply rewarded or severely punished in another world, according as he behaves himself in this. Now, admitting this to be the case, then, I say, that man has a right, by the laws of common equity, to be invested with such a capacity or power, as is sufficient (when duly exercised) to discover what it is he is accountable for....And it will likewise as evidently follow, that reason either is, or that it ought to be, a sufficient guide in matters of religion...²¹

The point has force because it hits the layman where it matters: we will all be held accountable in the next life for what we *know* in this one. If God is good, then we all surely ought to have been furnished with what is needed to acquire the relevant knowledge.

Chubb then addresses the Christian claim that reason *must* be insufficient since God has seen fit to provide special revelation. To put this rather circular point another way, the orthodox could argue that reason alone must not have been enough, or God would not have provided something additional. Chubb turns the tables, finding in this argument an opportunity to point to an uncomfortable fact about the provision of divine revelation:

If it should be further urged, that reason is not a sufficient guide in matters of religion, and that *divine revelation* was kindly given of God to man, to supply the defects, or insufficiency of reason in that respect; for if reason had been a sufficient guide in matters of religion, then there would have been no need of revelation: I answer; that if this

¹⁹ See above, chapter 2.

²⁰ Published in London by T. Cox, 1733.

²¹ *Ibid*, pp. 4, 6.

were the case, then the original constitution of things must have been very defective, as I observed above; because then, there would have been a whole species of beings, made accountable for their actions, without being furnished with capacities and powers sufficient to answer the purposes of such creatures; and then numberless millions of our species would have been very unequally and unkindly dealt with, because they have been destitute of such a divine revelation...²²

Chubb here pulls out his ‘trump card’ with what McDermott calls the ‘scandal of particularity’ or what might be more precisely termed the ‘scandal of limited access.’²³ As the Deists saw it, the most problematic issue in the notion of special revelation is simply that it was not given to everyone, but to a certain limited number of people located in particular times and places. The severity of the problem was informed by the discoveries of the Age of Exploration, through which it became clear that most (the oft-quoted figure was 5/6th) of the world’s population did not have access to this resource. For an age in which universal accessibility to truth was an absolute keynote, this was a powerful objection.

The problems posed by such points were ones that Edwards took quite seriously. Edwards had no inclination to deny any aspect of the Deist’s key premise that God makes himself known extensively in nature. Doing so would run counter to his entire philosophical/apologetic enterprise, and would be exegetically problematic.²⁴ If a just God holds all people accountable for their failure to respond to some kind of revelatory message from nature, then surely such knowledge must be available to all mankind. Edwards thus had to affirm that natural theology is theoretically possible—and incidentally, that more theological content was present than what the Deists wanted to see—but that for various reasons, it is practically insufficient for any purpose beyond condemnation or perhaps a proto-evangel.²⁵ This internal reconciliation was a well-worn path in the Reformed tradition. What was new was the steadily decreasing plausibility of this orthodox position in the eyes of

²² *Ibid*, p. 12.

²³ ‘The scandal of particularity, then, was an important stimulus to Deism. It was a principle reason why they judged the orthodox God to be a monster in whom they could not believe.’ McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods*, p. 25. ‘Scandal of limited access’ points more explicitly to the issue being one of *access* to special revelation.

²⁴ The ‘Blank Bible’ note in Romans 1:32-2:1 includes the statement ‘...they all have that light that is sufficient to teach them that those that commit such things deserve the condemnation and wrath of God, and so death and destruction, which they are very ready to acknowledge and declare in the case of others when they see their wickedness.’ Edwards, ‘Blank Bible’ in *Works Vol. 24*, p. 986.

²⁵ See, for example, the unpublished sermons on Romans 1:20 of June 1743 (Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University.)

the culture at large. Edwards was thus confronted with a complex problem, one calling for a carefully considered and multi-faceted response.

IV. Conventional Arguments

We are now in a situation to consider Edwards' arguments for special revelation. The two basic categories of argument have already been identified as the relational/communicative and the conventional. Although we wish to focus on the former due to its particular importance for Edwards' theology of revelation, we ought first to sample a couple of the more distinctively Edwardsean iterations of the latter.

The first of our examples focuses on the inadequacy of natural revelation to inform acceptable worship. Whatever we may know about God through reason, Edwards argues that we cannot know how to worship him as he desires without special revelation. In particular, we lack instructions on how to worship as a community. Edwards makes this point in what appears to be his very first 'Miscellany' devoted to defending the necessity of revelation:

'Tis easily provable, that the highest end and happiness of men is to view God's excellency, to love him and receive expressions of his love; and that therefore their greatest business is to meditate [on] and use means to understand God's bounty, and to express suitably their love; this love including all those other affections which depend upon it and are necessarily connected with it, which we call worship. The highest end of society, therefore, must be to assist and join with each other in this. But how comes it to pass, that this end of society was never yet obtained? When was there any social worship performed by Deists? And if there should be a society of Deists that were disposed socially to express their love to God, and honor of him, which way would they go to work? They have nothing from God to direct them. [...] We may be therefore convinced, that revelation is necessary in order to right social worship.²⁶

We may not be as sanguine as the young Edwards as to the ease of demonstrating rationally that the worship of God is the main business of human life, but this seemed to be a point at least partially admitted, if also twisted towards moralism, by the Deists.²⁷ In such a context, one in which almost everyone was agreed about the importance of the community worshiping God aright, Edwards' apologetic seizes upon an evident vulnerability in his adversary: Deist communal worship was

²⁶ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 127 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 291.

²⁷ See Chubb, *Discourse Concerning Reason*, pp. 14-15.

virtually unheard of. Lacking the sort of instructions provided by Scripture, the Deists had no guidelines for how to worship God.

Edwards also took a more Christological approach to the necessity of revelation. In the ‘Miscellany’ quoted below, Edwards points not so much to the notional inadequacy of natural reason, but to its inherent theological poverty resulting from a lack of relation to Christ:

The whole of Christian divinity depends on divine revelation; for though there are many truths concerning God and our duty to him that are evident by the light of nature, yet *no one truth is taught by the light of nature in that manner in which it is necessary for us to know it*. For the knowledge of *no truth in divinity is of any significance to us any otherwise that it, some way or other, belongs to the gospel scheme, or has relation to Christ the Mediator*. It signifies nothing for us to know anything of any one of God’s perfections, unless we know them as manifested in Christ; and so it signifies nothings to us to know any part of our duty, unless it will [bear] some relation to Christ. It profits us not to have any knowledge of the law of God, unless it be either to fit us for the glad tidings of the gospel, or to be a means of our sanctification in Christ Jesus, and to influence us to serve God through Christ by an evangelical obedience. And therefore we stand in the greatest necessity of a divine revelation.²⁸

Once again, Edwards affirms that ‘there are many truths concerning God and our duty to him that are evident by the light of nature.’ The problem is that as these truths come to us in this way, they lack the crucial connection to Christ that makes them salvific and otherwise useful to us. Though people could know the many doctrines that Edwards’ thought he could demonstrate through reason in the ‘Rational Account,’ it would do them no good outside the Christological perspective provided only by Scripture. Thus, ‘we stand in the greatest necessity of a divine revelation.’

V. The Relational/Communicative Argument

The truly original aspects of Edwards’ thought on the necessity of revelation, however, are found in his arguments based on relational communication. The Deists had framed the debate over revelation as if God and men were functionally no different from machines; the only question was whether or not the man-machine required a download of information from clockmaker-god’s database. The level of the discussion for them was confined to the sufficiency of purely notional

²⁸ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 837 in *Works Vol. 20*, pp. 52-53; emphasis mine.

information available from natural sources. In stark contrast, Edwards advanced an understanding of revelation that was relational and multi-dimensional. Revelation is the personal communication of a personal God to his beloved intelligent creatures, as the expression of his disposition to share his knowledge, love and joy. Here, Edwards was drawing deeply from the resources of his thoroughly Trinitarian theology and was thus positioned to make an advance in this aspect of the doctrine of revelation.

1. Communicative Revelation

Edwards first makes the point that had so completely escaped the Deists: God and man are not like robots requiring only some kind of data exchange to fulfil their purposes. God is a relational and intelligent being characterised by the attribute of communicativeness, and who exists in eternal communication between Father, Son and Spirit. Man, created in God's image, was designed to be in communication with his maker. Here we again direct our attention to 'Miscellany' 332:

The great and universal end of God's creating the world was to communicate himself. God is a communicative being. This communication is really only to intelligent beings: the communication of himself to their understandings is his glory, and the communication of himself with respect to their wills, the enjoying faculty, is their happiness.²⁹

As we saw in chapter one, 'God is a communicative being' means that communicativeness was for Edwards a divine attribute. This attribute amounts to a restatement of Edwards' doctrine of the Trinity as the eternal communication between the three Persons. God simply cannot be God without his *ad intra* communication.³⁰ And in a way that is at least analogical to the inter-trinitarian situation, God's subordinate purpose in creation is to be in communion—and thus conversation—with 'intelligent beings,' angels as well as humans. The implications of this line of reasoning for Edwards' theology of revelation are great, and will require some unpacking from several different perspectives.

God and man are not machines, and therefore the supply of notional information is only one part, and indeed the lesser part, of the picture involved in revelation. Edwards makes the crucial point that communication is far more than the impersonal exchange of information; it is a natural act between intelligent beings

²⁹ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 332 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 410.

³⁰ See the discussion on Edwards' definition of 'communication' above, chapter 1.

living in community with one another. God has obviously made us with the ability and desire to communicate with one another. But even this feature is in some way incidental to his making us with the ability for, and purpose of, communication with himself. We ought therefore to expect God to communicate with us. Edwards says:

If man's natural reason were never so perfect, and however little need we had of revelation for the enlightening our darkness and correcting our errors, yet it would be most unreasonable to suppose that there never should be any revelation made to man.... God made spirits to have communication; and will he not have any communion with them himself, although they are made for this very end, to meditate on him and to love [him]? How unreasonable is it then to suppose, that God will so abscond himself from these his understanding creatures, that were made to be conversant about him!³¹

So the question of whether or not we *need* revelation to supply data, which was the endless preoccupation of the Deists, becomes an entirely secondary issue. What is primary is that God is by nature a communicative Being, and would certainly communicate with us *even if we possessed exhaustive notional knowledge*.

Verbal communication is therefore to be expected as an essential part of God's dutiful reign over his intelligent creation:

It seems to me a kind of unreasonable thing, to suppose that there should be a God without any word of his; that there should be a God, an intelligent voluntary being, that has so much more concern with [us], and with whom we have infinitely more concern than with any other being, and yet that he should never speak. It is a property of all intelligent beings, that God has made in his own image, to speak; they are hereby distinguished from inferior creatures. It is therefore strange that any should imagine that the supreme intelligence should never speak, that there should be no word of his.³²

Here again, Edwards is grounding his argument on an implicit understanding of communication as a characteristic of God. Specifically, speech is 'a property of all intelligent beings.' If this is true of lesser intelligent beings such as humans, certainly it must be true of the greatest intelligent being, God.

2. Conversational Revelation

With the outline of Edwards' thought in place, and some notion of its import in view, let us now consider the *conversational* element taught by Edwards'

³¹ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 204 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 339.

³² Edwards, 'Miscellany 544' in *Works Vol. 18*, pp. 89-90.

relational doctrine of revelation. As Miscellany 1337 is Edward's definitive statement on natural revelation's insufficiency in terms of notional content, Miscellany 1338 is Edward's definitive statement about the ethical considerations of revelation. Edwards' definition here seems to represent an advance in the history of the doctrine of revelation, if not also in communication theory:

By CONVERSATION I mean intelligent beings expressing their minds to each other in words or other significations equivalent, being signs intentionally directed to us for our notice, whose immediate and main design is to be significations to or expressions of the mind of him or them who causes or gives them to the knowledge or notice of him or them to whom they are directed; wherein those signs are evidence distinguished from works done by them, from which we may argue their minds, though the first and most immediate design of the work be something else besides as mere signification to us of the mind of the efficient. Thus I distinguish God's communicating his mind to us by word or conversation from giving us opportunity to learn it by philosophical reasoning. By the latter I mean arguing the nature and will of God by God's works, which we observe in the natural world.³³

The key point of Edwards' definition of conversation is that it describes the intentional transmission of an individual's mental activity through the medium of meaningful signs. This represents a fairly serviceable theory of communication, and specifically in its reference to intentionality, seems to be an anticipation of more modern theories.³⁴ More to the point at hand, Edwards is making a distinction here between *intentional* communication and the reconstruction of thought based on the evidence of actions. What the Deists had—a forensic reconstruction of the Prime Mover's intentions based upon natural reasoning—was patently not conversation.

With this said, Edwards goes on to make the case that what is desired and expected in any society is friendship. And friendship manifestly requires the kind of conversation that is possible only in special revelation:

The special medium of union and communication of the members of the society, and the being of society as such, is conversation. And the well-being and happiness of society is friendship. 'Tis the highest happiness of all moral agents. But friendship above all other things that belong to society, requires conversation. 'Tis what friendship most naturally and directly desires. 'Tis maintained and nourished by that, and the felicity of friendship is tasted and enjoyed by that. The happiness of God's moral kingdom consists, in an inferior degree, in

³³ Edwards, 'Miscellany 1338' in *Works Vol. 23*, p. 345.

³⁴ See Dominic A. Infante, Andrew S. Rancer, and Deanna F. Womack, *Building Communication Theory* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waverland Press, 1990).

the member's enjoyment of each others' friendship, but infinitely more in the enjoyment of the friendship of their head. Therefore, here especially, and above all, is conversation requisite.³⁵

There could seemingly be no greater contrast possible between the Deist's clock-maker, who created a mechanical universe long ago and subsequently left it to his human cogs to infer information about himself, and the God whom Edwards describes above, who appears as the head of a community in which he holds ongoing conversation among his personal friends *for the sake of relationship*. Edwards' distancing himself from the Deist conception of God and the way he communicates with his creatures is now logically complete, and if we may say so, astonishingly beautiful. If such an argument lacked philosophical coercion, it certainly did not lack aesthetic appeal.

3. Conversational Scripture

Thus far we have been examining Edwards' line of reasoning that it would be expected, if not inevitable, for God to converse with his intelligent creatures in some kind of special revelation. But we have not yet spoken of the actual means of God's doing this. Though Edwards' obviously had in mind the Scriptures, his arguments are mainly concerned to establish the principle of special revelation rather than the reasonability of God using a particular type of media to do so. However, the notion that such communication should take the form of a written book is by no means a necessary inference from the theoretical inevitability of God engaging his creatures in conversation. The example of our normal mode of personal conversation, which is primarily oral, would seem rather to militate against this. If God wanted to have a conversation with us as intelligent beings, why would he give us a book instead of talking to us directly?

Edwards is aware of the problem, and is at pains to demonstrate how a book—the Bible—could not only be considered a legitimate means of conversation, but is in fact the best possible method for God to converse with humans in our current condition. Once again, the entry is quoted at length in order to leave Edwards' argument intact:

And the way of God's holding communion with men that the Christian religion supposes, is the most congruous that can possibly be thought of towards men in a fallen estate and in a wicked world, viz. to have his word written in a volume: where the matter is so various,

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 350.

so exceeding comprehensive and diversified, and suited to every circumstance; the texts having so many different aspects, respects, aptitudes and senses, as beheld in different lights and compared with God's providences or other parts of his Word. And there are such influences and teachings of the Spirit of God accompanying it to exhibit this Word thus in its various lights, continually bringing forth something new *suited to the present stream of our thoughts, affections, and our case; that it is just as if God held up a continual conversation by word of mouth to those that read, understand and believe.* And God doth indeed hold communion with [them]; and yet this is done in a secret way hidden from the wicked world, who it is not proper should see and intermeddle, nor is it exposed to their abuse and mockery—pearls are not cast before swine—for though they can read the Bible, there is nothing of this communion with God enjoyed by them, but all is to them as a dead letter. What other way can be thought of, so congruous as this?³⁶

Edwards begins by setting the theological parameters for his reasoning. A written book is the best that could be thought of, not for ideal people in perfect circumstances, but for '...men in a fallen estate and in a wicked world.' Manifestly, this was not the case for the original man and woman in the Garden of Eden, who were able to speak directly with God.

Edwards then points to the nature of the Bible's diverse content as being able to cope with the vastly differing circumstances of the untold multitudes who read it, thus highlighting the noetic dimension (the Logos) of special revelation. But as we might expect from Edwards' Trinitarian doctrine of revelation, Edwards is compelled to immediately balance this with an equal affirmation of this affectional dimension (the Spirit), which accompanies it '...to exhibit this Word thus in its various lights.' In concert, Word and Spirit are '...continually bringing forth something new suited to the present stream of our thoughts, affections, and our case.' This leads up to Edwards' grand statement that in effect it is '...just as if God held up a continual conversation by word of mouth to those that read, understand and believe.' The answer to the question, how can God hold a conversation with us by using a book, is here answered only by reference to a multi-dimensional understanding of God's communication.

In the context of eighteenth century apologetics, which so often tended toward bare rationalism, it is perhaps just as significant to notice what Edwards here denies. 'God doth indeed hold communion with [them]; and yet this is done in a

³⁶ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 204 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 339-340; emphasis mine.

secret way hidden from the wicked world...'. This is a private conversation, inaccessible to the unregenerate. There are thus very clear limits to Edwards' rationalist tendencies.

4. Two-sided Conversation

Conversations have two sides. We have discussed how Edwards defends one side of the divine conversation, how that God speaks to man in special revelation, but the more consistent Deists denied the other side of the conversation as well.³⁷

Edwards replies that the nature of God as an intelligent being no less requires human response in prayer, confession and worship.³⁸

Hence how rational is it to suppose, contrary to the principles of the Deists, that God ought to be worshipped by prayer, confession, praise and thanksgiving, and those duties in which we speak to God, and have to do with [him] as a properly intelligent being, or one that perceives and knows what we say to him that we ought to show respect to him by voluntary acts, as expression of our thoughts and volitions and motions of our hearts, purposely expressed before him and directed to him, as all intelligent creatures do to all other intelligent beings with whom they are concerned, or have intercourse. Never to go to God, or to purpose to exhibit our thoughts to him, or to direct any expression of any motion of our hearts to him, as we naturally do to all properly intelligent beings with whom we are concerned, certainly is not to treat him as a properly intelligent being.³⁹

The principle of God being an intelligent, relational and communicative Being works both ways regarding the reasonableness of the divine-human conversation. Edwards thus concludes 'And as 'tis hence rational to suppose that it should be required of us that we should speak to God, so 'tis as rational to suppose that he should speak to us.'⁴⁰ Notice also that just as God's communication to us includes affectional as well as noetic content, so Edwards thinks our communication to God should convey the 'expression of our thoughts and volitions and motions of our hearts.'

³⁷ Earlier Deists such as Toland sometimes held, with apparent philosophic inconsistency but in line with contemporary cultural sensibilities and political expediency, that the worship of God and some manner of prayer were reasonable. The changed environment of the 18th century afforded later figures such as Chubb greater candour.

³⁸ One might think Edwards could relate the sacraments somehow to his discussion of the two-sided conversation between God and men, but we have not found an example of this kind of connection.

³⁹ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 749 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 397.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

We have already noted that Edwards qualifies his defence of written special revelation as being the most appropriate mode of conversation *in this world*. But in heaven, the conversation becomes more intimate:

When the saints get to heaven they shall not merely see Christ, and have to do with him as subjects and servants with a glorious and gracious Lord and Sovereign, but Christ will most freely and intimately *converse* with them as friends and brethren. This we may learn from the manner of Christ's *conversing* with his disciples here on earth....Though Christ be in a state of exaltation at the right hand of God, and appears in an immense height of glory, yet this won't hinder his *conversing* with his saints in a most familiar and intimate manner.⁴¹

So we see that Edwards did not think that a written Bible was the ideal format for the divine-human conversation in an absolute sense. Rather, the glorified saints get to converse with Christ 'in a most familiar and intimate manner.' In fact, as Edwards states elsewhere, this perfecting of the divine-human conversation is a primary benefit of the incarnation: 'For Christ being united to the human nature, we have advantage for a far more intimate union and conversation with him, than we could possibly have had if he had remained only in the divine nature.'⁴² This approach to the incarnation is fully consistent with a theology that supposed God created the world in order to communicate himself personally.

Edwards' conversational principle, invoked periodically throughout his writings, was a centrepiece of his arguments for the necessity of special revelation. But this principle could be used in a radically different direction as well. Edwards usually began as if the existence of God was a given—he was, after all, replying to Deists who believed at least this much—and goes on from there to argue for special revelation. But at least on one occasion, Edwards also experimented with the idea of trying to prove God's existence *from* his conversational revelation.

Suppose all the world had otherwise been ignorant of the being of God before, yet they might know it; because God has revealed himself, he has shown himself, he has said a great deal to us and *conversed much with us*. And this is every whit as rational a way of being convinced of the being of God, as it is of being convinced of the being of a man who comes from an unknown region, and shows himself to us, and converses with us for a long time: we have no other reason to be convinced of his being, than only that we see a long series of external concordant signs of an understanding, will and design, and various

⁴¹ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 571 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 107; emphasis mine.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 110.

affections—the same way God makes himself known to us in his word.⁴³

It is understandable that Edwards did not pursue this line any further as an explicit apologetic for the existence of God. Although the reasoning is cogent enough, the conclusion follows from a premise that no atheist would accept: that God has, in fact, spoken to us. It yet merits notice in our discussion because it demonstrates just how deeply Edwards' viewed special revelation as a personal, relational and conversational word from God. To his mind, divine revelation was so akin to personal conversation that it *should* be able to prove the existence of God to an atheist. This notion will reoccur in other forms below.

VI. Precedents in Reformed Theology

This chapter has suggested that the relational/communicative argument for the necessity of special revelation was one of Edwards' distinctive contributions to this doctrine. To further develop this claim, it would perhaps be worthwhile to look briefly at a couple of Edwards' prominent predecessors. The questions are, were there any precedents in the tradition whatsoever, and if so, how did they compare to Edwards' formulation? As we shall see presently, there does appear to be some limited precursors in Calvin and Turretin that may have planted the seed of this notion within the Reformed tradition, but they also point to Edwards' originality in his development of it.

Edwards was self-consciously not a slave of John Calvin, but nor was he averse to being known as a member of Calvin's theological tradition.⁴⁴ Thus statements from Calvin on the matter are of value to us, such as this passage from the *Institutes*:

Despite this [general revelation], it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe. It is not in vain, then, that he added the light of his Word by which to become known unto salvation; and he regarded as worthy of this privilege those whom he pleased to gather more closely and intimately to himself.⁴⁵

⁴³ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 254 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 364; emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ 'I should not take it at all amiss, to be called a Calvinist, for distinction's sake: though I utterly disclaim a dependence on Calvin, or believing the doctrines which I hold, because he believed and taught them; and cannot justly be charged with believing in everything just as he taught.' Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* in *Works Vol. 1*, p. 131.

⁴⁵ *Institutes* I.6.i, quoted from the Battles translation Volume I pp. 69-70.

Calvin is here speaking in quite relational terms; in granting special revelation, God ‘regarded as worthy of this privilege those whom he pleased.’ This is precisely not the language of the Deists’ machine requiring information from a database, but the language of a personal sovereign granting a relational privilege to chosen subjects.

Francis Turretin was a more proximate influence on Edwards. On this issue, Turretin writes

Therefore it was necessary that the defect of the former revelation (made useless and insufficient by sin) should be supplied by another more clear (not only as to degree, but also as to species), not only that God should use mute teachers, but that his own sacred voice should also not only declare the excellence of his attributes, but open to us also the mystery of his will in order to our salvation.⁴⁶

There are two points to note in this quotation. First, Turretin’s point hinges not so much on the absolute necessity, but on the *propriety* of God communicating to us his truth, a feature we have noted in Edwards’ model. Secondly, we see the intimacy involved in Turretin’s concept of special revelation, of ‘his own sacred voice’ communicating to us in a more personal mode than general revelation.

Such seeds lying in the fertile mind of Jonathan Edwards may have gone a fair way in development towards the relational/conversational model. Yet it would seem such limited precursors are probably insufficient in themselves to account for some of the distinctive features, particularly the conversational element, of Edward’s model. Thus we shall consider a possible antagonistic stimulus.

VII. Edwards’ Antagonist: Locke?

Though Edwards was a theologian of original genius capable of achieving at times in his speculations what would appear to be a transcending of his context, his apologetic and polemic works were almost inevitably framed in response to specific figures. His main theological treatises such as *Freedom of the Will* and *Original Sin*, for example, were written to counter the specific arguments of Chubb, Whitby and Watts (*Freedom of the Will*) and Taylor and Turnbull (*Original Sin*).⁴⁷ We have already discussed the two main figures Edwards was replying to in his standard arguments for the necessity of revelation, Chubb and Tindal. We turn now to

⁴⁶ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, translated by George Musgrave Giger and edited by James T. Dennison Jr., 2 vols, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), p. 56.

⁴⁷ Paul Ramsey, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 1*, p. 65; Clyde A. Holbrook, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 3*, p. 23.

consider the identity of the potential stimulus for his conversational/relational model of revelation.

Any identification of an antagonist is somewhat complicated by the fact that no name or explicit reference is contained in Edwards' relevant entries. However, based on relatively clear internal and external evidence, it seems that Edwards was replying to John Locke. Specifically, Edwards took exception to Locke's delimiting of man's endowment of communicative capacity to fellow humans in Book III of the *Essay*. This omission of any provision for divine-human communication might appear to be a relatively minor and innocent point, but it could only prove devastating for an orthodox understanding of revelation. And it was not just that Edwards was making logical inferences; Locke himself makes this distressing implication all too clear in the conclusion of Book III by stating that limitations in human language make reason inherently more reliable than any revelation. Prompted by a recent contribution to the longstanding controversy over Edwards' relation to Locke, our discussion will first establish the basic possibility that Edwards could be responding to the English philosopher in such a way, as we look at the point at which these figures seemed to have differed.

Edwards' relationship to Locke has been a contentious issue in Edwardsean scholarship since at least the time of Perry Miller.⁴⁸ This discussion is joined here only because a recent contribution to it has cast doubt on the notion that Edwards ever targeted Locke in his defence of special revelation against the hegemony of human reason. Robert E. Brown argues that '...at critical points the estimations of Edwards and Locke regarding the epistemological status of biblical revelation were markedly similar,' and that they both sought to maintain '...the philosophical prerogative of biblical revelation for religious discourse.'⁴⁹ In the context of providing supportive evidence for his thesis, Brown points to the fact that the name of Locke is not to be found in Edwards' polemics against Socinian/Deist epistemology: 'It can hardly be coincidence or mere omission that Edwards nowhere

⁴⁸ Some of the more significant examples after Miller include Claude Smith, 'Jonathan Edwards and "the Way of Ideas,"' *Harvard Theological Review* 59, no. 2 (1966), pp. 153-73; Paul Helm, 'John Locke and Jonathan Edwards: A Reconsideration,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 7 (1969), pp. 51-61; Norman S. Fiering, 'The Rationalist Foundations of Jonathan Edwards's Metaphysics' in Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 73-101; Robert E. Brown, 'Edwards, Locke, and the Bible,' *The Journal of Religion* 79, no. 3 (1999), pp. 361-84; and Paul Copan, 'Jonathan Edwards's Philosophical Influences: Lockean or Malebranchian?' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 1 (2001), pp. 107-24.

⁴⁹ Brown, 'Edwards, Locke, and the Bible,' p. 362.

specifically mentions Locke or the *Essay* in his extensive criticisms of those who would “make reason a higher rule than revelation.”⁵⁰ I will argue that, on the contrary, even though the name John Locke does not appear, Edwards’ ‘Miscellany’ 204 is a direct critique of Locke’s position subordinating revelation to reason.

The mere fact that Edwards held a general appreciation for Locke must be conceded from the outset. Samuel Hopkins famously relates a personal recollection of Edwards picking up a copy of the *Essay* and proclaiming that he had found in it ‘more satisfaction and pleasure in studying it, than the most greedy miser in gathering up handfuls of silver and gold from some new discover’d treasure.’⁵¹ But as Paul Copan points out, such appreciation does not preclude critique.⁵² Similar appreciation could be found even in one of Locke’s most outspoken contemporary critics—John Norris said he would not part with the *Essay* for ‘half a Vatican.’⁵³ Brown also points to Edwards’ extensive and positive use of Locke’s commentaries as evidence for common truck.⁵⁴ But Edwards could be surprisingly appreciative of figures in some areas whose positions in other respects were violently antithetical to his own.⁵⁵ One such example would be his voluminous appropriation of Chevalier de Ramsay, of whom Sweeney remarks ‘as a Roman Catholic convert and an ardent anti-Calvinist, Ramsay represents an unlikely source of influence on Edwards’ thought.’⁵⁶ Edwards drained inkwells dry quoting Ramsay approvingly on useful issues, yet we would not make too much of this appreciation in terms of Edwards’ larger persuasions. So although it is clear that Edwards appreciated Locke, this alone would not seem to decide the issue.

Instead of general attitudes, perhaps a more relevant line of enquiry would be whether we know of any examples in which Edwards unambiguously critiqued

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 373.

⁵¹ Hopkins, *Life*, p. 3, quoted in Wallace Anderson, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 17.

⁵² Copan, ‘Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophical Influences,’ pp. 109-110.

⁵³ Norris, *Cursory Reflections Upon a Book Call’d, an Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 4th (1699) ed. (London: S. Manship, 1690), p. 35.

⁵⁴ Brown, ‘Edwards, Locke, and the Bible,’ p. 373.

⁵⁵ ‘...the insistence of Grotius, Tillotson, Clarke, and Locke on the Christian doctrines of human weakness and depravity, and their eagerness to plumb the thought of ancient “heathens” to offer reasonable arguments on their behalf, made them welcome theological allies for Edwards. Though he disagreed with many of these thinkers on doctrines like the Trinity and divine predestination, Edwards shared their desire to defend both the reasonableness of Christianity and the need for divine revelation, and was willing, as always, to borrow good arguments where he could find them.’ Amy Plantinga Pauw, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 20*, pp. 12-13.

⁵⁶ Douglas A. Sweeney, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 23*, p. 13.

specific aspects of Locke's thought. And, of course, there is just such an example to be found in the theory of personal identity. Early on in his career, Edwards adopted uncritically Locke's theory of personal identity as consisting in consciousness. In entry 11 of 'The Mind,' the young Edwards opines 'Well might Mr. Locke say that identity of person consisted in identity of consciousness...'.⁵⁷ But by entry 72, he was repudiating this theory in favour of divine constitution: 'It is a mistake that it [personal identity] consists in sameness or identity of consciousness...'.⁵⁸

So we see that Edwards was capable of critiquing Locke. Considering now the specific evidence for the case at hand, the key document is Book III of Locke's *Essay*, dealing with Locke's theory of language. The first words of this book lay out a basis for communication that is rooted in man's creation:

God having designed Man for a sociable Creature, made him not only with an inclination, and under a necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind; but furnished him also with Language, which was to be the great Instrument, and common Tye of Society.⁵⁹

Locke takes our ability and 'inclination' for verbal communication to be a design feature attributable to God. Yet for Locke, the objects of such communication are 'those of his own kind,' other human beings. Given Edwards strongly teleological and God-centred doctrine of creation, this omission of the vertical component of communication must have struck him as unnecessarily restrictive and inadequate. Why should Locke limit man's communicative capacity to 'his own kind'?

We are thus not surprised to find Edwards writing a notebook entry responding to such an 'unreasonable' assumption, the aforementioned 'Miscellany' 204:

And 'tis evident, God made spirits to have communication; and will he not have any communion with them himself, although they are made for this very end, to meditate on him and to love [him]? How unreasonable is it then to suppose, that God will so abscond himself from these his understanding creatures, that were made to be conversant about him!⁶⁰

The entry quite naturally reads as if Edwards is reacting to some particular statement, and the thoughts being related make it likely that Locke's statement in the *Essay*

⁵⁷ Edwards, 'The Mind' entry 11 in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 342.

⁵⁸ Edwards, 'The Mind' entry 72 in *Works Vol. 6*, pp. 385-386.

⁵⁹ Locke, *Essay*, III.1.1.

⁶⁰ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 204, in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 339.

could be in view. Edwards agrees with Locke that ‘understanding creatures’ are made to have communication.⁶¹ But he ridicules the notion that this communication should be restricted to the horizontal component, as Locke seems to suppose.

We have suggested that Edwards would have been uncomfortable with Locke’s statement lacking allowance for the God-man communicative relationship. But in the course of Book III there appears something more obviously problematic. Locke goes on to talk about how language, although the only means we have for inter-personal communication, is severely limited in its fidelity due to the arbitrary human process of linking audible sounds with mental ideas.⁶² Where was Locke going with all this, and from what did Edwards want to keep us? Near the end, Locke says:

Since then the Precepts of Natural Religion are plain, and very intelligible to all Mankind, and seldom come to be controverted; and other revealed Truths, which are conveyed to us by Books and Languages, are liable to the common and natural obscurities and difficulties incident to Words, methinks it would become us to be more careful and diligent in observing the former, and less magisterial, positive, and imperious, in imposing our own sense and interpretations of the latter.⁶³

Locke’s point is that special revelation (‘revealed Truths’) is ‘liable to the common and natural obscurities and difficulties incident to Words’ so diligently pointed out in Book III. Therefore, since revelation is so woefully mired in problematic words, and since on the other hand ‘Natural Reason’ is so ‘plain’ and ‘intelligible,’ he makes the modest suggestion that we should give precedence to and place our emphasis on reason. In other words, Locke’s conclusion to Book III *undermines the whole concept of special revelation*. It is no wonder that Edwards would want to critique Locke’s reasoning on this vital matter, nor is it surprising that he would trace such thinking back to a premise based on a flawed understanding of creation.

⁶¹ Note the slight change in terminology. Unlike Locke, Edwards is always careful to make room for angels as well as men in categories such as ‘understanding creatures’ or ‘intelligent beings.’

⁶² Locke makes this case throughout Book III, but particularly chapters 1-22. Notice that Locke seems to think that intra-personal communication, using proprietary language to call to mind one’s own thoughts, is the one exception to this situation. Edwards could have replied that, no matter what the situation with human language, our reception of special revelation is just such a case. The ‘divine and supernatural light’ is predicated on the presence of the Holy Spirit within the believer, and thus God is in fact speaking to himself using his own proprietary words.

⁶³ Locke, *Essay*, III.9.23.

There is also strong external evidence to bolster this connection between Miscellany 204 and Locke's *Essay*. Thomas A. Schafer, the longstanding dean of 'Miscellany' scholarship, dates this entry to between December 1725 and January 1726, during Edwards' Yale tutorship.⁶⁴ This is the very same time Schafer indicates Edwards was writing 'The Mind' entry numbers 40-45. The subject of 'The Mind' 41 happens to be a topic in Book II of Locke's *Essay*, while 42 and 43 deal with topics in Book III.⁶⁵ It is therefore undeniable that these entries were written at a time when Locke and the *Essay* were very much on the young Edwards' mind. We are thus not surprised to find in a 'Miscellany' entry written at this same time in which it seems as if he is simply picking up the conversation with Locke.

As to why Edwards does not actually name Locke in this case, the reason need neither be 'coincidence' nor 'mere omission.' Along with his entire generation, Edwards respected Locke as the towering figure he was, and it is not altogether improbable that he might demure from naming names unnecessarily.⁶⁶ In fact, there seems to be at least one cognate example of Edwards doing likewise with regard to Isaac Watts.⁶⁷

In light of the evidence that has been considered, we find it beyond reasonable doubt that Edwards was responding to Locke on this issue. The matter was worth our discussion for two reasons. Firstly, it is important to demonstrate that Edwards' was sensitive to the full range of philosophic currents that held dangerous implications for Christianity, not merely to the obvious threat posed by Deism. Locke was the most influential figure of the age, and the some of the dogma he taught in Book III of the *Essay* was potentially lethal to the entire notion of special revelation. Secondly, this incident helps us to understand what might have prompted Edwards to formulate his highly original relational/communicative argument for the necessity of special revelation.

⁶⁴ Thomas A. Schafer, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 96.

⁶⁵ *Works Vol. 6*, pp. 359-362.

⁶⁶ Edwards does mention Locke's name publicly with reference to personal identity in *Original Sin*, but he does so in a manner that softens the blow somewhat: 'though this be not allowed to consist wholly in that which Mr. Locke places it in, i.e., *same consciousness*.' Edwards, *Original Sin*, in *Works Vol. 3*, p. 398.

⁶⁷ Unlike the other antagonists he responded to in *Freedom of the Will*, Edwards refrains from using Watts' name. The most likely reason, though not the only one possible, is that Edwards hesitated to inveigh against the character of one so highly regarded by himself and others in his circle.

VIII. The Necessity of Revelation in Edwards' Apologetic Programme

We finally consider how the forgoing discussion relates to one of the more intriguing issues for interpreters of Edwards' theological and philosophical project: his shift in apologetic method from the 'Rational Account' to the 'History of the Work of Redemption.'⁶⁸ The basic facts of the matter are these: from 1724 until around 1740, Edwards planned as his main work a comprehensive rational apologetic of orthodox theology called the 'Rational Account.'⁶⁹ By the time he writes to the Princeton Trustees in 1757, however, the projected masterworks are now the 'History of the Work of Redemption' and the 'Harmony of the Old and New Testament.'⁷⁰ Edwards does not here or anywhere else explain exactly why he might have abandoned the former project that once held such attraction for him, but we have some clues from his enthusiastic description of the 'History of the Work of Redemption':

This history will be carried on with regard to all three worlds, heaven, earth, and hell: considering the connected, successive events and alterations, in each so far as the Scriptures give any light; introducing all parts of divinity in that order which is most scriptural and most natural: which is a method which appears to me the most beautiful and entertaining, wherein every divine doctrine, will appear to greatest advantage in the brightest light, in the most striking manner, showing the admirable contexture and harmony of the whole.⁷¹

Clearly, Edwards thinks that he has found the ideal way of achieving what he is trying to accomplish theologically. Elements of the advantages afforded include its narrative flow, its connection of events across realm and time and the fact that it is a 'scriptural and most natural' method, elements apparently lacking in more conventional approaches.

Besides these positive advantages to the historical method, Ava Chamberlain offers the following possible disadvantages of the 'Rational Account':

A purely rational defense of Christian doctrine would have required Edwards to use, as did the latitudinarians in their anti-Deist polemic, the standard of rationality advocated by his opponents. To avoid this

⁶⁸ I do not mean that this issue has necessarily attracted a great deal of discussion; Chamberlain's very plausible treatment of it in the introduction to *Works* 18 may have quelled further discussion for the time being.

⁶⁹ Chamberlain, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 18*, pp. 24-25. See the discussion on the 'Rational Account' above, pp. 57-58.

⁷⁰ Edwards, 'Letter to the Princeton Trustees' in *Works Vol. 16*, pp. 727-728.

⁷¹ Edwards, 'Letter to the Princeton Trustees' in *Works Vol. 16*, p. 728.

‘tactical mistake’ [Henry F. May] Edwards may have abandoned the ‘Rational Account’ and adopted a more historical approach to the defense of Christian doctrine.⁷²

Chamberlain’s analysis seems plausible, but there is perhaps more that could be said on the subject. One piece of the primary evidence that requires some further explanation is the fact that Edwards did not cease writing on topics that were earmarked for inclusion into the ‘Rational Account’ in 1740. Why did he continue to write on some of these, often using the same rational apologetic approach, long after he abandoned the ‘Rational Account’ project? A related issue of special concern here is if Edwards found the defence of special revelation so very vital, how might this end have been served by transitioning to a historical method?

First of all, it seems that any analysis that gives the impression that Edwards made an abrupt and decisive transition to the ‘History’ project and to an exclusively historical approach should be qualified.⁷³ Notice Edwards’ precise words in the letter to the Princeton trustees:

I have already published something on one of the main points in dispute between the Arminians and Calvinists: and have it in view, God willing (as I have already signified to the public), in like manner to consider all the other controverted points, and have done much towards a preparation for it. But besides these...⁷⁴

Edwards does not immediately talk about the ‘History of the Work of Redemption;’ this project is described after the words ‘*but besides these.*’ There were other works in progress that Edwards wanted to finish. He had already published *Freedom of the Will*, and was readying *Original Sin*, and seemed to have had intentions for doing likewise on ‘all the other controverted points’ quite apart from the ‘History.’ Given the fact that Edwards’ collection of data for a defence of the necessity of special revelation continued unabated until the end, it seems possible that a work making this point would have been on the list of ‘other controverted points.’ It is also possible that such a book would have made use of both rational and historical methodology; Edwards does not say that his ‘entirely new’ method would apply to these controversial works.

Moreover, we should consider how the necessity of special revelation material might have been incorporated into a historical methodology, whether in

⁷² Chamberlain, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 29.

⁷³ Not that such a description was necessarily Chamberlain’s intention.

⁷⁴ Edwards, ‘Letter to the Princeton Trustees’ in *Works Vol. 16*, p. 727.

‘History of the Work of Redemption’ or in a separate work using a similar approach. Many of the conventional arguments were already predicated on the testimony of history anyhow, so the shift would only further emphasize them. What, then, of the relational/communicative argument? Edwards believed that God is a communicative being as a fundamental reality, an understanding that can and must explain everything else in nature and history. God seeks communion with his intelligent creatures, and he carries on a conversation with them. The problem was that Locke and the latitudinarian proto-liberals no less than the Deists denied the reality of this conversation at every significant point. Edwards thus needed to demonstrate as convincingly as possible the reality of God’s conversation. Perhaps the best way of doing this was not so much to prove its hypothetical rationality, but to *demonstrate the factuality of the matter in history*. God *has* carried on this conversation with his people in human history, in the ‘History of the Work of Redemption.’ This conversation has continued right up until Edwards’ own time, as seen in the awakenings. God is a personal, relational, communicative being, and this is demonstrated not only in once giving a special revelation in the Scriptures, but in the prophecy of that book being fulfilled in history; in prayers being answered, in real communion being accomplished in redemptive history.

Claude Smith noticed hints of this connection between Edwards’ concerns for conversational revelation and his historical method back in 1966:

[Edwards] concludes that it is wholly arbitrary and illogical to reject the general proposition that God speaks to man. Indeed, Edwards goes further. Though he could accept mystery as part of revelation, since it was God who was conversing with man, he undertook to show that the revelations of the Bible were not as mysterious as some people thought. In *The History of Redemption* he showed that there was a pattern and inner consistency to the various conversations which God has with his people, as these are recorded in the Bible.⁷⁵

Edwards could use scriptural history to show that ‘there was a pattern and inner consistency to the various conversations which God had with his people.’

Given the significance that Edwards’ himself seems to give to his methodological development, we are encouraged to explain it as fully as we can. Among other things, the shift to an historical approach using the record of history and current events to show how God has in fact conducted his personal,

⁷⁵ Claude Smith, ‘Jonathan Edwards and ‘the Way of Ideas,’’ *Harvard Theological Review* 59, no. 2 (1966), pp. 158-159.

conversational communication with people would perhaps better serve to prove this point so dear to Edwards.

VIII. Conclusion

We have considered Edwards' apologetic for the necessity of special revelation. Over the course of this chapter and the ones preceding it, some themes have emerged. One is that Edwards' faced a range of threats and challenges, not only from the Deists but also the 'master-spirit of the age' John Locke. Edwards thus framed his theology of revelation in the context of fighting an entire intellectual milieu that was deeply hostile to the notion of a privileged, personal communication given only to a few. Another theme is that Edwards seemed always unwilling to compromise with these corrosive forces, but sought rather to affirm whatever truths he saw in the most radical terms possible. This had the net result of a theology of revelation that was balanced as well as profound. Most significantly, we see the importance of Edwards' relational/conversational model, not as a context-bound apologetic device but as an outworking of a Trinitarian theology of revelation predicated on God's personal and tri-dimensional communication to us. We turn now to Edwards' larger doctrine of Scripture.

Chapter 4

The Harmony of Scripture

Divine Revelation is like a light that shines in a dark place.

—Jonathan Edwards, sermon on II Peter 1:19¹

I. Introduction.

Our discussion of Edwards' doctrine of Scripture commenced in a preliminary way with the necessity of special revelation in the previous chapter. There we began to see the special place that Edwards reserved for Scripture in his theology of revelation. Scripture was not some superfluous source for information already available through human reason, as the Deists and their more respectable proxies supposed. Rather, it was God's means of carrying out his personal conversation with regenerate humanity in this life. In this chapter, we explore Edwards' thought concerning this keystone of God's communicative project. In common with his theological inheritance, Edwards believed that the Scriptures shared the attributes of God. For Edwards, informed by his thoroughgoing Trinitarianism, the most significant of these attributes was its beautiful harmony. In an intellectual milieu bent on rebellion against the authority of this book as much as against its author, interpreting its harmony was for Edwards the pre-eminent apologetic method as well as the best way to commune with his Lord.

We have previously noted the apologetic impetus that motivated so much of Edwards' work, but the centrality of this feature in his thoughts on Scripture is worth some additional mention here. Edwards' apologetic agenda for Scripture was influenced by the presence of antagonists to his left and to his right. On one side was a continuum of those who could be called rationalists, from the Arminians who like the original Remonstrants combined a libertarian theological orientation with a rationalist approach to the Bible, through the Unitarians all the way to the Deists. On the other side were the 'enthusiasts' of Edwards' day that were threatening to discredit the work of the Awakening by their claims to new supernatural revelation.

¹ *Works Vol. 19*, p. 710.

Edwards responded to these various stimuli by a comprehensive apologetic programme for Scripture paralleling that of his larger project. Mostly due to his untimely death he never completed any of the ‘great works’ he planned, but in each case he left behind extensive notes and design outlines that tell us what he hoped to accomplish. In all three cases, the evidence suggests they were apologetic in intent.² The form of his apologetic differed significantly from the early ‘Rational Account’ to the late ‘Harmony of the Old and New Testaments’ and the ‘History of the Work of Redemption,’ but the overall strategy was always to demonstrate harmony.³ As we have seen, harmony was for Edwards a trinitarian attribute;⁴ if perfect harmony could be shown to reside in Scripture, it would be a powerful argument for its divine origin and authority. In the early ‘Rational Account’ project, this would have been accomplished obliquely by demonstrating the consistency of biblical doctrine with the rigors of reason. The ‘Harmony’ project would have done this directly by demonstrating the consistency of the Bible’s teaching with itself, while the ‘History of the Work of Redemption’ would have shown the consistency of the Bible’s account with the realities of human history. Some of the constituent pieces that were intended for inclusion in these projects will be examined below.

Though apologetic interests drove him to write, his own thinking was founded on a belief in the authority of the Bible that required no external support. Edwards was perhaps more able in philosophical demonstrations of doctrine than most of those who were willing to pin the fortunes of Christianity upon them, but he grounded the content of his faith entirely upon the contents of Holy Scripture. His view of Scripture was that it was the infallible Word of God written, without qualification. And in what must be seen as a crucial distinction, he argued that the Bible accords well with the best of judicious rational enquiry, not that the Bible’s credibility rests upon it passing the tests established by sceptics. In light of this, we shall begin with Edwards on the authority of Scripture.

II. The Authority of Scripture

The paramount question regarding Scripture in Edwards’s day was one of authority. Issues such as biblical criticism and the canon, though debated

² See Stephen J. Nichols, *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: the Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003).

³ See the discussion on the ‘great works’ below, chapter 6.

⁴ See above, chapter 1.

independently and apparently on their own merits, were at root nothing more than pawns employed to overthrow the Bible's authority over matters religious and civil. Thus Edwards' efforts naturally focused on this issue.

1. Edwards' Beliefs vs. Apologetics

From the outset of our discussion on authority, a distinction needs to be maintained between the belief structure predicated on scriptural authority that Edwards himself operated within, and the defence he gave of this view to an unregenerate audience operating outside it. This distinction begins with the plain fact that Edwards nowhere rests his own conviction about the Bible's authority on any kind of rational proof or evidential probability. Edwards' position on biblical authority was logically prior to other beliefs, and he would agree with Calvin that a true conviction on the matter was unashamedly and irreducibly of supernatural origin.⁵ On the other hand, the unbeliever is bereft of the only means—the 'new Sense' given by the Spirit—that would allow him to '*know* that the Scriptures are the word of God.'⁶ His proofs were therefore made in order to blunt the attacks of arrogant critics and render them inexcusable before God, and not because he harboured expectations that anyone would come to full assurance of the truth through them. This point is worth making because the unreflective tendency might be to equate Edwards' extensive apologetic with his own belief structure, a confusion of categories that would produce a fundamentally distorted picture of Edwards' work in this area.

Admittedly, Edwards himself does not always make this distinction as obvious as might be desired. Consider the following statement made in a sermon bearing the formidable and characteristically Edwardsean title 'Yield to God's Word, or be Broken by His Hand':

God gives evidences of the truth of his word by giving evidence that it *is* his word. God is not wont to speak to men, leaving of 'em without sufficient means to know who it is that speaks. He has given the world great evidence that his word, delivered to us in the Holy Scripture, is his word. [Both] external [and] internal [evidences] are reasonable [and] excellent, the evident stamp [of God].⁷

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.18; Commentary on Acts 17:27.

⁶ Edwards, *Works* Vol. 25, p. 438.

⁷ Edwards, *Works* Vol. 25, p. 211.

God gives human beings ‘sufficient means to know who it is that speaks,’ a statement that could be taken to mean that a conviction of biblical authority can follow from this evidence alone. Yet in another sermon given at roughly the same point in Edwards’ ministry, the very opposite point is urged:

[The unconverted] can’t know that the Scriptures are the word of God. He may think that the Scriptures are the word of God, but he don’t know it. ...no natural man knows the truth of the gospel. The utmost a natural man can come to, is only to think the gospel is true. He is not thoroughly convinced; if he were convinced, he would be gained.⁸

The reconciliation of these disparate statements lies within Edwards’ theological epistemology. Briefly, Edwards is with the mainstream of Reformed thought in insisting that God gives sufficient evidence for himself and for his Word. Sinners, through some noetic or ethical failure, turn away from this evidence and are therefore without excuse in their rebellion. In Edwards’ case, natural men have a *moral* deficiency through original sin that means they cannot appreciate this evidence. The Spirit must provide the requisite new sense.⁹ So although Edwards never misses an opportunity to point to the evidence God has given in support of the Scriptures, and frequently holds skeptical noses to it, he recognizes that to be truly convinced of the authority of the Bible is an irreducible mark of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. With this distinction noted, we move on to Edwards’ own position on the authority of Scripture.

2. Edwards’ Position on Biblical Authority

Edwards’ relationship to the Scriptures was one governed by authority. This relationship was accompanied by a set of beliefs, such as inspiration, sufficiency and inerrancy, that explicate the various ways biblical authority is manifested. But logically prior to them is Edwards’ unquestioning, sometimes explicit, often implicit conviction that the Scriptures were the Word of God and therefore determinative for all other beliefs.¹⁰ Stephen J. Stein, who has probably spent more time in Edwards’

⁸ Edwards, *Works Vol. 25*, p. 438.

⁹ See, for example, Edwards’ unpublished sermon no. 26 on I Cor. 2:14 given at Bolton, which teaches ‘There is a spiritual understanding of divine things which all natural and unregenerate men are destitute of.’

¹⁰ See, for example, the revealing ‘Natural Philosophy’ Cover-Leaf Memoranda 19: ‘Lest I may mention a great many things, and places of Scripture, that the world will judge but frivolous reasons for the proof of what I drive at, not to mention such as I fear it of as what I depend on for proof, but to bring ’em in so that the force of reasons will naturally and unavoidably be brought to the mind of the reader.’ (Edwards, *Works Vol. 6*, pp.194-195)

vast body of scriptural commentary than any other scholar living or dead, can make the unqualified pronouncement that Edwards never doubted the authority of the Bible.¹¹ His opinion is corroborated not only by abundant primary evidence, but also by virtually every other scholar who has ventured to make a direct statement on the matter. Intellectual historian Peter Gay declares that ‘For Edwards, the authority of the Bible is absolute.’¹² Nathan Hatch and General Editor of the Works of Jonathan Edwards project Harry Stout say that biblical exegesis held ‘an all-consuming hold’ on Edwards’ thought.¹³ Though Edwards was hardly adverse to the use of reason in theological discourse, Helen Westra thought that for Edwards, ‘reason must always bow to divine revelation and the authority of Scripture.’¹⁴ Such statements in the secondary literature could be multiplied. This is not, however, to say that all scholars have been willing to acknowledge such sentiments directly; many, particularly those following Perry Miller in the great wave of academic interest beginning in the mid-20th century, have ignored or downplayed this decidedly anti-modernist aspect in Edwards in favour of other interests. Carl Bogue, writing near the close of this epoch, thus has to ask in rhetorical exasperation ‘What if Jonathan Edwards were first and foremost a Christian theologian willingly subjecting himself and his thoughts to the revelation of “the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God”?’¹⁵ But although there has been some considerable ducking of the issue, there has never appeared a competent refutation of the fact that Edwards held an unconditional adherence to the authority of Holy Scripture.

There are a number of contexts in which a theologian such as Edwards could communicate his position. One of the more dramatic is in an ordination sermon, first brought to wider attention by Westra’s 1991 article and subsequently published in two venues, in which Edwards is reflecting on the norm of the minister’s preaching.¹⁶ Edwards’ doctrine is that ministers have no licence to teach what might seem

¹¹ Stein, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 15*, p. 21.

¹² Peter Gay, *A Loss of Mastery: Puritan Historians in Colonial America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 96.

¹³ Nathan O. Hatch and Harry S. Stout, eds. *Jonathan Edwards and the American Experience*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 9.

¹⁴ Helen Petter Westra, ‘Jonathan Edwards And ‘What Reason Teaches,’” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991), p. 497.

¹⁵ Carl W. Bogue, *Jonathan Edwards and the Covenant of Grace* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing Company, 1975), p. 5.

¹⁶ Westra, ‘What Reason Teaches’; the sermon was then published in *Southern Baptist Journal* in 1999, then as part of *Salvation of Souls* in 2002.

reasonable to them—as was the policy of the Deists and the practice of the Arminians—but are bound absolutely to God’s revelation given in Scripture.

Sir, I would now humbly and earnestly recommend to you that Holy Book which God is about to commit into your hands, as containing that message which you are to deliver to this people in his name. God gives you this Word—which is his Word—to preach that, and not the dictates of your own reason. You are to preach the dictates of God’s infinitely superior understanding, humbly submitting your reason as a learner and disciple to that, renouncing all confidence in your own wisdom and entirely relying on God’s instructions.¹⁷

Edwards’ unconditional endorsement of biblical authority, in absolute contradistinction to any reliance upon human wisdom, could hardly be any more emphatic.

This ordination sermon also gave Edwards an opportunity to explain, as he often did, some of the reasoning he thought would lend support to the biblical doctrine under discussion. The reasoning he cites gives us some important insight into the epistemological priority he assigned the Scripture in his own belief structure.

If no doctrine is to be received but what reason teaches them, men must first see whether their reason teaches it before they receive it. And in this rule ’tis impossible that God’s revelation should ever really be the ground of our receiving any one doctrine whatsoever because no doctrine is received till we have first consulted reason to know whether that teaches it. So then our receiving it is always in this way prior to our hearing the word of revelation. So then the foundation of faith is men’s reason or word and not divine revelation...¹⁸

The point Edwards is making is that the Bible must be the ‘ground’ of all that we receive as true. If we do as the rationalists insist by passing every doctrine found in the Bible through the filter of human reason, then we have mistakenly assigned epistemic priority to reason: ‘the foundation of faith is men’s reason or word and not divine revelation.’ This mistake Edwards found to be incoherent and rebellious.

In another place, Edwards similarly teaches that the Bible is also the sole permissible foundation for theology. Once again, the affirmation is emphatic. But here he appends a conclusion that constitutes a deviation from his immediate

¹⁷ Edwards, ‘Ministers to Preach Not Their Own Wisdom but the Word of God’ in Richard A. Bailey and Gregory A. Wills, *The Salvation of Souls: Nine Previously Unpublished Sermons on the Call of Ministry and the Gospel by Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), p. 128-29.

¹⁸ Westra, ‘What Reason Teaches,’ p. 501.

theological inheritance, calibrating the definition of divinity to move in a slightly more radically anti-rationalist direction:

...*this is divinity*; which is not learned, as other sciences, merely by the improvement of man's natural reason, but is taught by God himself in a certain book that he hath given for that end, full of instruction. This is the rule which God hath given to the world to be their guide in searching after this kind of knowledge, and is a summary of all things of this nature needful for us to know. Upon this account divinity is rather called a doctrine, than an art or science.¹⁹

In the first section of his *Institutes*, Turretin refers to theology as a science dozens of times, and he is far from singular in so doing.²⁰ However, possibly after witnessing the pitfalls of the Enlightenment approach to the self-sufficient acquisition of knowledge, Edwards now thinks that classifying theology/divinity as a science concedes too much to human endeavour. 'Science' implies a process of observation and ratiocination to arrive at truth. In Edwards' view, this is simply not an accurate description of what happens, or *should* happen, in theology. Theology is rather a 'doctrine' in which we learn from God, from material available to us in 'a certain book' from which we are to learn. Considering how able and willing Edwards was to employ reason in his theologising, this statement is remarkable testimony of the depth of his position on biblical authority.

3. Conventional Arguments for Authority

Edwards thus yielded no ground to the host of contemporary voices who had less submissive attitudes toward the revealed Word of God. On the contrary, Edwards was absolutely uncompromising in his *a priori* adherence to biblical authority. We turn now to examine a brief sampling of but two of what we would term Edwards' conventional arguments to support his position, both to be found in the 1737 quarterly lecture 'Divine Revelation is Like a Light.'²¹

One argument Edwards offered was simply to point out that the Scriptures certainly *claimed* to be the Word of God: 'If the Scriptures ben't the Word of God, it is the greatest cheat and falsehood that ever was in the world. For from the

¹⁹ Edwards, *Works Vol. 22*, p. 86.

²⁰ See Turretin, *Institutes of Elencitic Theology*, translated by George Musgrave Giger, edited by James T. Dennison Jr. 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), pp. 1-4, 16-18, 22.

²¹ Edwards, 'Divine Revelation is Like a Light,' in *Works Vol. 19*, p. 704-733.

beginning to the end, it has that show and pretense that it is the Word of God.’²² Edwards is here, as elsewhere, assuming a complete correspondence between the Bible’s authority and its status as the Word of God. The apologetic action used here is much the same as with the ‘Liar, Lunatic, Lord’ trichotomy made popular by C. S. Lewis, whereby Jesus’ audacious claim to be the Son of God makes it impossible that he could be a ‘good man’ yet otherwise ordinary. Many would blithely affirm that the Bible is a ‘good book,’ though perhaps not the very Word of the living God. Edwards says if it is not exactly that, then it is ‘the greatest cheat and falsehood that ever was in the world,’ since it makes egregiously false claims about itself.

Another conventional argument is based on the historical evidence of the effects biblical revelation has had on human society. Edwards recounts the dramatic effects the revealed Christian religion had on the European peoples, bringing them from a state of tribal darkness indistinguishable from the native North Americans his audience was familiar with to the height of civilization: ‘Our ancestors were, before the gospel came among [them], ignorant and barbarous, much like the Indians here in America. Wherever the gospel has come, it has civilized the people, and brought not only the knowledge of God, but all other useful knowledge.’²³ Edwards makes the following inference:

Hence we may learn how unreasonable they are who reject or doubt of the authority of the Holy Scriptures; for ’tis most evident that this, and no other, has in fact been that revelation that has, from the beginning, been such a light in this world, as we have heard.²⁴

The Bible’s authority is demonstrated by its power to transform those who embrace its light, and those who reject it are ‘unreasonable.’

III. The Harmony of Scripture

Edwards employed a range of evidential arguments in favour of the Bible’s authority, and most were not much different than might be found commonly in 18th century apologetics. But there was one aspect of his apologetic program that was very different, and that was the concept of harmony. Harmony, as previously discussed, is a specifically Trinitarian divine attribute. Edwards’ larger theological project, as we propose it, was to demonstrate the harmony of all things as the self-

²² *Ibid*, p. 721.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 716.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 721.

communication of a harmonious Triune God.²⁵ His project with regard to Scripture was to demonstrate that the Bible displayed the divine hallmark of harmony, and was thus to be received as authoritative. The Scriptures exhibited harmony with itself ('The Harmony of the Old and New Testaments'), with reason ('The Rational Account'), and with the events of history ('The History of the Work of Redemption'): they were thus the authoritative Word of God.

The apologetic power of the harmony concept came from its grounding in a fundamental aspect of human epistemology. Harmony, in Edwards' thought, was a means of perceiving the underlying reality of a single intelligent author. This philosophic principle is established in entry 63 of 'The Mind':

Sensible things, by virtue of the *harmony* and proportion that is seen in them, carry the appearance of perceiving and willing being. They evidently show at first blush the action and governing of understanding and volition. The notes of a tune of the strokes of an acute penman, for instance, are placed in such exact order, having such mutual respect one to another, that they carry with them into the mind of him that sees or hears the conception of an understanding and will exerting itself in these appearances.²⁶

Harmony is precisely the opposite of true randomness, which can never be the product of intelligent thought. Harmony consists in 'exact order' and 'mutual respect', the appearance of which rightly leads us to believe there is a thinking agent behind the work of composition we have in view. Edwards thinks that this is simply a description of our natural mental process when exposed to the perception of harmony, rather than the effects of any supernatural gifting. Whether the unregenerate could rightly *appreciate* the harmony before them, was of course another matter entirely.

Given this understanding of the mental implications of the perception of harmony, if one believes that there was one supremely intelligent Author behind all of Scripture and wishes to prove this point to others, then in principle one simply needs to point out the harmony that is surely exhibited in Scripture. Edwards was quite certain that just such a case could be made:

The being of a God is evident by the Scriptures, and the Scriptures themselves are an evidence of their own divine authority, after the same manner as the existence of a human thinking being is evident by the motions, behavior and speech of a body of a human form and

²⁵ See below, chapter 6.

²⁶ Edwards, 'The Mind' entry 63 in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 382, emphasis mine.

contexture, or that that body is animated by a rational mind. For we know this no otherwise than by the consistency, *harmony* and concurrence of the train of actions and sounds, and their agreement to all that we can suppose to be in a rational mind. [...] So there is that wondrous universal *harmony* and consent and concurrence in the aim and drift, such an universal appearance of a wonderful glorious design, such stamps everywhere of exalted and divine wisdom, majesty and holiness in matter, manner, contexture and aim; that the evidence is the same that the Scriptures are the word and work of a divine mind.²⁷

This ‘Miscellany’ was written towards the beginning of Edwards’ career, and there is no evidence that he ever changed his mind as to the potential for harmony to establish the divine origin and authority of the Bible for those who were willing to listen.²⁸ Rather, it was a crystallization of the direction he would take for his lifetime project of re-establishing the authority of Scripture.

Moving forward in time to the very close of his life, we find Edwards in the 1757 letter to the Princeton Trustees relating some rather mature plans for one of the two master works he had in mind. Here we find not only confirmation of the constancy of his thought on this matter, but also of the specific ways Edwards thought he had available to demonstrate the Bible’s harmony:

I have also for my own profit and entertainment, done much towards another great work, which I call *The Harmony of the Old and New Testament*, in three parts. The first considering the prophecies of the Messiah [...] showing the universal, precise, and admirable correspondence between predictions and events. The second part: considering the types of the Old Testament, showing the evidence of their being intended as representations of the great things of the gospel of Christ: and the agreement of the type with the antitype. The third and great part, considering the harmony of the Old and New Testament, as to doctrine and precept.²⁹

Edwards thus thought he had three primary avenues for pointing out the harmony he believed to be so very evident throughout Scripture: fulfilled prophecy, typological agreement, and doctrinal unity. Abundant instances of Edwards finding data to fill in these three categories are to be found throughout the corpus, not least in the nearly complete notebooks we have that were to have formed the bulk of the ‘Harmony.’³⁰

²⁷ ‘Miscellany’ 333 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 410; emphasis mine.

²⁸ The group of ‘those who were willing to listen’ are ultimately those under supernatural influence.

²⁹ Edwards, ‘Letter to the Princeton Trustees’ in *Works Vol. 16*, p. 728.

³⁰ See the unpublished transcriptions of the ‘Harmony’ notebook and ‘Miscellanies’ 1067 and 1068 at Yale University’s Jonathan Edwards Center, as well as ‘Miscellany’ 1069 found in *Works Vol. 11*.

In these, we find Edwards exerting himself to show that minute details and subtle interrelations over many centuries and dozens of very different human writers demonstrate a level of prophetic, typological and doctrinal harmony that could only be explained by divine authorship.

IV. The Inspiration of Scripture

The means by which God transmitted his verbal communication through the agency of his creatures was also a topic that engaged the mind of Jonathan Edwards. Beyond the intrinsic interest the doctrine of inspiration would have for one who was so concerned with divine communication generally, Edwards was faced with a number of contemporary theological tasks that prompted his consideration on the subject. There was of course the pressing apologetic task of defending the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God, a defence that for Edwards required the component of divine inspiration. Inspiration or something like it was the only concept capable of eluding the sceptics' insistence that the Bible was subject to all the limitations of human authorship. There were the related tasks of explaining why the Old Testament histories, unlike other ancient works of history, were inspired, and how the inspired writers could speak to things beyond the events at hand. There was the philosophical task of incorporating inspiration into a Christian epistemology for the age of Locke, seen in 'The Mind.' There was also an apologetic assignment raised by those who read the accomplishments of pagan philosophy as support for the sufficiency of natural revelation, leading Edwards to the interesting conclusion that some philosophers were divinely inspired. And there was the important polemic task of refuting the enthusiasts who claimed God was still dispensing inspiration in the present-day.

We should first observe that Edwards' position on the net effect of inspiration, in which the contents of Scripture were entirely under the specific control of God, was similar to that of his immediate predecessors. Due no doubt to the doctrine of inspiration's unfashionably blatant appeal to the supernatural and the authoritative privileging it lent to Scripture, this doctrine was already under increasing pressure in the later part of the 17th century. John Owen articulated one of the most comprehensively and radically conservative positions on inspiration possible in his *Pneumatologia*.³¹ In gauging the general bent of Edwards' position, it is

³¹ Owen, *Pneumatologia* or *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit* in *The Works of John Owen* Vol. III (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth: 2000.)

useful to note that Edwards incorporates with evident approval a highly typical statement from Owen's work in the 'Blank Bible' entry for I Chronicles 128:19:

The Spirit of God acted and guided the prophets 'as to the very organs of their bodies, whereby they expressed the revelation which they had received by inspiration from him. They spake as they were acted by the Holy Ghost. [...] The Spirit of God not only revealed it unto [David], but so guided him in writing of it down, as that he might understand the mind of God out of what he himself had written; or he gave it him so plainly and evidently, as if every particular had been expressed in writing by the finger of God.'³²

Edwards' own statements on inspiration comport well with Owen's deeply conservative understanding expressed here. If Edwards' articulation differed, it was in his more extensive efforts to incorporate the natural and supernatural aspects of divine revelation into an account displaying the unity and diversity of the ways in which God communicates to his creatures.³³

The prominence of this interest in integrating the modes and media of revelation is seen by its appearance even in a sermon, a forum in which Edwards usually avoided unnecessary speculation. In the context of a sermon seeking to prove the illegitimacy of ongoing supernatural revelation, Edwards wished to make it clear from the outset that *all* human knowledge, and not just inspiration, is fully attributable to God. 'Tis God that makes known all truth to men: [he] is the fountain of all light and knowledge, of those things that we know by natural means—by experience, teaching, [and] reason.'³⁴ This divine origin and ultimate unity of all knowledge was a fundamental tenet of his larger philosophical and theological project. Since *all* forms of knowledge are from God, the distinctive characteristic of inspiration must lie elsewhere.

In the description of inspiration that follows in the sermon, Edwards locates this distinctive attribute in the concept of *immediacy*:³⁵

But besides these ordinary ways, God has oftentimes made known truth to men in an extraordinary way, and that is by *immediately* impressing truths on their minds by suggestions of those truths then

³² Edwards, 'Blank Bible' entry on I Chron. 28:19 in *Works Vol. 24*, p. 410. Edwards' reference is 'Owen, On the Spirit, Bk. 2, ch. 1, § 10,' found in *The Works of John Owen* Vol. III p. 134.

³³ This basic concept is one Owen emphatically endorsed (see *ibid*, pp. 144-145), but he perhaps did not show as much concern as Edwards did to spell out its implications.

³⁴ Edwards, 'Extraordinary Gifts of the Spirit are Inferior to Graces of the Spirit,' sermon on I Cor. 13:8-13 in *Works Vol. 25*, p. 283.

³⁵ See the discussion of Edwards' understanding of the supernatural in history in chapter 5, below.

made, either by some voice or in some dream or vision, or by words or ideas *immediately* and miraculously excited, without any dependence on any notice the person to whom the truth is suggested has of that truth by way of his outward senses, or by his experience, or reason, or any preceding testimonies, or any foregoing declaration of that truth to him in any preceding revelation. This is making known truth by *immediate* revelation.³⁶

What makes inspiration special is specifically the lack of dependence on arriving at the relevant truth by ‘outward senses.’ Inspiration is in this way truly *immediate*.

This understanding of inspiration does not mean, however, that the internally revealed truth was in conflict with sense data, or even that the truth was not revealed in sense data as well. There is in fact often a confluence of external and internal communication paths reaching the inspired writers of Scripture:

1First, ’tis declared by a voice from heaven, which was the testimony of the Son of God, the same person spoken of in the next verse. At the same time it was inwardly revealed to John by the Holy Spirit, confirming what the voice of the Son had declared, ‘Yea, saith the Spirit,’ etc.³⁷

This confluence is entirely consonant with Edwards’ general view of the harmony of divine communication. Here also the Trinitarian implications of this harmony of communication, in which the Son and the Spirit speak the same message through different media, are made explicit.

Edwards moreover clearly made allowance for God to use the personalities and personal circumstances of the individual prophets to write what he intended them to write.

I imagine that Solomon, when he wrote this song, being a very philosophical, musing man, and a pious man, and of a very loving temper, sees himself in his own musings to imagine and to point forth to himself a pure, virtuous, pious and entire love; and represented the musings and feelings of his mind, that in a philosophical and religious frame was carried away in a sort of transport: and in that [frame] his musings and the train of his imaginations were guided and led on by the Spirit of God.³⁸

This view is again reminiscent of the Puritan doctrine of inspiration represented by Owen: ‘he that toucheth skilfully several musical instruments, variously tuned,

³⁶ *Ibid*; emphasis mine.

³⁷ Edwards, ‘Blank Bible’ entry on Rev. 14:13 in *Works Vol. 24*.

³⁸ ‘Miscellany’ 303 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 389.

maketh several notes of music.’³⁹ God makes natural use of the personalities and life situations of those whom he superintends to write the Scriptures.

The specific problem that elicited one of Edwards’ more original formulations was that of the epistemic status of inspiration. How did the inspired writers *know* they were inspired, and should they be trusted in their judgment? This was of course a matter of crucial importance in the intellectual atmosphere of the 18th century. In the context of a nearly full-scale epistemology found in ‘The Mind,’ Edwards writes the following:

The evidence of immediate inspiration that the prophets had when they were immediately inspired by the Spirit of God with any truth is an absolute sort of certainty; and the knowledge is in a sense intuitive, much in the same manner as faith and spiritual knowledge of the truth in religion. Such bright ideas are raised, and such a clear view of a perfect agreement with the excellencies of the divine nature, that it’s known to be a communication from him. All the Deity appears in the thing, and in everything pertaining to it. The prophet has so divine a sense, such a divine disposition, such a divine pleasure, and sees so divine an excellency and so divine a power in what is revealed, that he sees immediately that God is there as we perceive one another’s presence when we are talking together face to face. [...] But yet there are doubtless various degrees in inspiration.⁴⁰

The evidence Edwards offers might appear irreducibly subjective, consisting simply of ‘an absolute sort of certainty.’ Edwards conceives of the experience as ‘in a sense intuitive,’ similar to self-justifying experience of faith itself. Yet Edwards also thinks that the experience to be analogous to normal sense perception, in which the inspired prophet ‘sees immediately that God is there as we perceive one another’s presence when we are talking face to face.’ Here Edwards is applying in a different area the same basic conviction that fuels his apologetic of harmony: given the right awareness and perspective, God’s communication to us differs little from that of interpersonal human communication in which the identity of our conversation partner is never in the slightest doubt. He finds biblical support for his theory in I Samuel 3:7: ‘the prophets, after they had once had intercourse with God by immediate revelation from God, gained acquaintance with [him] so as afterwards to know him, as it were to know his voice or know what was indeed a revelation from God.’⁴¹ So both in the case of our reading of the Scriptures today and in the case of

³⁹ Owen, *ibid.*, p. 145.

⁴⁰ Edwards, ‘The Mind’ in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 346.

⁴¹ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 1144 in *Works Vol. 20*, p. 518.

the original giving of the message to the inspired prophet, we are made decisively aware of the presence of the divine author speaking to us.⁴²

Edwards' most controversial opinion in relation to inspiration is no doubt his speculation that the heathen philosophers were helped by divine inspiration.⁴³ In order to understand why Edwards might have wanted to adopt a position that could only be described as eccentric, we would do well to recall his situation. Edwards was defending the necessity of special revelation before an audience increasingly convinced of the efficacy of reason alone. As seen in his extensive use of the *prisca theologia* theory, Edwards was not about to yield all the great intellectual achievements of the pre-Christian world to the mere workings of natural reason.⁴⁴ What, then, of the ancient philosophers, for whom evidence of their dependence on *prisca theologia* was not forthcoming? Rather than concede that their reason alone could attain such truth, Edwards is willing to think that they might have been the recipients of divine inspiration.⁴⁵

It may be worthy of consideration whether or no some of the HEATHEN PHILOSOPHERS had not, with regard to some things, some degree of INSPIRATION of the Spirit of God, which led 'em to say such wonderful things concerning the Trinity, the Messiah, etc. Inspiration is not so high an honor and privilege as some are ready to think. It is no peculiar privilege of God's special favorites. Many very bad men have been the subjects of it, yea, some that were idolaters. [...] Yea the devils themselves seem sometimes to have been immediately actuated by God and forced to speak the truth in honor to Christ and his religion. [...] Why might not Socrates and Plato and some others of the wise men of Greece have some degree of inspiration, as well as the wise men from the east who came to see Christ when an infant?⁴⁶

⁴² All of which is consonant with Edwards' notion of God having a conversation with his people, discussed above in Chapter 3.

⁴³ See Greg D. Gilbert, 'The Nations Will Worship: Jonathan Edwards and the Salvation of the Heathen,' *Trinity Journal* 23, no. 1 (2002), pp. 53-76; see also Gerald R. McDermott, 'Response to Gilbert: "The Nations Will Worship: Jonathan Edwards and the Salvation of the Heathen".' *Trinity Journal* 23, no. 1 (2002), pp. 77-80.

⁴⁴ *Prisca theologia* was the theory that accounted for elements of truth in the non-Christian world by claiming that such truths came from tradition handed down from figures such as Noah or through later contact with the Jewish nation. See Edwards, 'Miscellany' 953 in *Works Vol. 20*, p. 222.

⁴⁵ Interestingly, Edwards had earlier written that the reason why the heathen philosophers 'affected to be thought inspired' was simply because they derived their information from 'the ancient, inspired, holy fathers.' Edwards, 'Miscellany' 953 in *Works Vol. 20*, p. 225. The later position discussed here seems to be in some tension with this earlier entry.

⁴⁶ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 1162 in *Works Vol. 23*, p. 84.

Edwards' last reference points to one of the few positive scriptural precedents that Edwards had to go on, that the presumably pagan Magi were granted supernatural revelation. And if a case could be made that the remarkable spiritual insights of Plato and Aristotle were the result of inspiration, it would eliminate the relevant support for the efficacy of natural reason alone.

However, Edwards might have solved a minor apologetic annoyance only by creating a major theological headache: if these philosophers were indeed inspired, why are their works not deemed authoritative Scripture? Edwards recognised the problem, and presumed that they were not given the 'certain evidences' necessary to establish them canonically.⁴⁷ The implication is that Edwards understood inspiration to be not co-extant with Scripture, meaning that there is a species of inspiration that does not attain scriptural status. The decisive element would appear to be the presence or absence of appropriate accompanying evidence.

As to what might be God's purpose in granting inspiration when no Scripture would result from it, Edwards also had an answer: 'yet a good end might be answered in giving these revelations nevertheless.' Edwards then gives a list of four ways this non-Scriptural inspired revelation could have been of use.⁴⁸ The last of these constitutes one of the most controversial statements we have in the entire corpus: '...we know not of how great benefit the truths suggested might be to their own souls.' McDermott alerts us to the problematic possibilities: 'Edwards is hesitant and tentative, but he nevertheless clearly opens the possibility that these heathen could have used revelation for their own spiritual benefit—a notion that is incoherent unless it means they can be saved.'⁴⁹ Whether this episode constitutes an intriguing nod to the possibility of the salvation of the heathen from an arch-conservative Reformed theologian or a case where Edwards' apologetic motivations and penchant for speculation exceeded his scriptural warrant depends on one's perspective. However, it might be worthwhile to note that in any case Edwards

⁴⁷ See *ibid.* Edwards elsewhere explains what these might have been: 'These extraordinary gifts of the Spirit were indeed given to many others besides the apostles, to those that were not penmen of the Scriptures, but yet it will not follow but that the great end of all these gifts was to settle a standing revelation. It is to be considered that these gifts was not only to give the means of grace or impart to the church a standing rule, but to establish and confirm it: to give it with evidence. All the extraordinary gifts that were in the apostle's days were given as confirmations of the word of Christ and the apostles; they were so many seals to their mission and divine testimonies to the divinity of their gospel.' Edwards, *Works Vol. 25*, p. 286.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Gerald R. McDermott, *Jonathan Edwards Confronts the Gods: Christian Theology, Enlightenment Religion, and Non-Christian Faiths* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.141.

closes the door on inspiration of any kind with the completion of John's Apocalypse, meaning that even if inspired heathen could at one point be saved in this way the possibility has now long ceased.⁵⁰

As we conclude our discussion of Edwards' doctrine of inspiration, we turn to two items pertaining to the Old Testament. The first addresses the problem of how the prophets and poets could communicate more than what their immediate subject matter would seem to involve:

There are many of the Psalms, and some other parts of Scripture, wherein the penmen immediately intended the affairs of the church of Israel. But these things being represented poetically, in those beautiful and exalted images, which a poetical genius and fire, excited and invigorated by an extraordinary exercise of grace and a holy and evangelical disposition, in which excitations there was the afflatus of God's Spirit—their minds naturally conceived such poetical images of the Jewish church, as very exactly described the affairs of the gospel and the Christian church.⁵¹

Though the 'penmen immediately intended' only what was current in the religion of Israel, an 'extraordinary exercise of grace' and 'the afflatus of God's Spirit' meant that they could 'very exactly' describe the things of the gospel and the Christian church.

The other issue was Edwards' response to the special scrutiny being given to the Old Testament historical material. Some rationalists were hypothetically able to accept that God might inspire prophets with direct spiritual pronouncements, but found it impossible to see how the mere historical account could be inspired. Edwards opined that 'Moses was so intimately conversant with God and so continually under the divine conduct, it can't be thought that when he wrote the history of the creation and fall of man, and the history of the church from the creation, that he should not be under the divine direction in such an affair.'⁵²

V. The Canon of Scripture

Edwards' position on the canon of Scripture is rather straightforward, and is well summarised by Stein: 'For Edwards, the boundaries of the Christian canon were not debatable. He accepted the prevailing view that the biblical canon had been

⁵⁰ See the discussion on the closing of the canon below.

⁵¹ 'Miscellany' 251 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 363.

⁵² 'Miscellany' 352 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 427-428.

closed long ago and that there was no need to augment it.’⁵³ Of course this traditional position on the canon was under attack in Edwards’ day, and we are not surprised to find that he was concerned to mount a sustained defence of it. His work in this area fits into three basic categories. The first category, found primarily in the notebook material, consists of scholarly apologetic material defending the canon from the attacks of sceptical critics. The second, found in a variety of places, argues for the closing of the canon in the first century AD and for the cessationist position with regard to the possibility of ongoing special revelation.⁵⁴ A third category, pervasive throughout the corpus, was Edwards’ demonstration of the harmony of the biblical canon.⁵⁵

Pauw notes that Edwards ‘was willing, as always, to borrow good arguments where he could find them,’ and this was certainly true of the defence of the canon.⁵⁶ Since the state of the art in this discipline required a fairly specialized access to and knowledge of ancient sources that Edwards lacked, he was largely dependent on the work of others to obtain the raw material. But this did not mean that Edwards had nothing of his own to contribute to the cause. ‘Miscellany’ 1060 ‘Concerning the Canon of the New Testament’ is a good example of his *modus operandi*, and will form the basis of our discussion here. The entry consists primarily of extended quotations from Jeremiah Jones’ *A New and Full Method of Settling the Canonical Authority of the New Testament*, a work advancing the historical thesis that ‘the greatest part of Christians were very early agreed, what books were canonical and to be looked upon as the rule of their faith.’⁵⁷ Edwards meticulously copies Jones’ scholarship at great length, but intersperses this with his own logical and theological supplements.

Edwards’ approach in his original observations was often to take the same data used by the sceptics and to turn it around in support of the opposite (conservative) conclusion. One of his favourite arguments was thus to say that the very fact that there were so many counterfeits so early in church history proves not that they were all fakes, but that there were some widely-acknowledged genuine

⁵³ Stein, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 15*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ See also Philip A. Craig, “‘And Prophecy Shall Cease’: Jonathan Edwards on the Cessation of the Gift of Prophecy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64, no. 1 (2002), pp. 163-84.

⁵⁵ See section on Harmony, above.

⁵⁶ Pauw, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ in *Works Vol. 20*, p. 13.

⁵⁷ Jeremiah Jones, *A New and Full Method of Settling the Canonical Authority of the New Testament*, 3 vols. (London, 1726); quoted in Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 1060 in *Works Vol. 20*, p. 396.

articles worthy of counterfeit: ‘...that there should be such a multitude of counterfeits and imitations of these Gospels shows not only that there were genuine Gospels, but also shows the great value and importance of those genuine Gospels, and the high repute they had in the Christian church.’⁵⁸ Edwards reiterates this line for the Book of Acts in the same entry, and for the Book of Revelation elsewhere.⁵⁹

Edwards also tried his hand at the Synoptic Problem. He thinks that the extensive but not exact correspondence between Matthew and Mark is evidence not for Mark being forgery, but rather proof of its authenticity:

’Tis a great argument that St. Mark’s Gospel was written honestly, and that it was no knavish forgery, that ’tis so much like St. Matthew’s, only shorter. For what could induce a knave to go about to forge a history of Christ’s life and death having scarce anything remarkable in it, but what was in an history already extant, and very little differing from it in any respect, but only that it has not so much in it.⁶⁰

Edwards also turns on its head the objection based on the *differences* between the accounts of Matthew and Mark. ‘...if St. Mark had writ with this design [of confirming Matthew’s lies], he would not have said less than St. Matthew, and there should have been none of those seeming differences and inconsistencies which there are between St. Matthew’s Gospel and his.’⁶¹

Edwards also defended the inclusion of certain problematic books into the canon. His comments to the effect on the book of Daniel are representative, and retain considerable currency with reference to contemporary conservative biblical scholarship on this issue.

The matter of the first finding and receiving this remarkable book and adding it to the canon must have been a famous event among [the Jews]... But that all should be without the least trace or footstep in history, or that any remaining account of any such event, but that it, the whole affair, should presently sink into oblivion and so universally pass among the people as though this book had always been part of their canon and universally received as such, even from the time of the captivity, is quite incredible.⁶²

⁵⁸ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 1060 in *Works Vol. 20*, p. 416.

⁵⁹ Edwards, ‘Blank Bible’ entry on Rev. 1 in *Works Vol. 24*, p. 1203.

⁶⁰ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 1060 in *Works Vol. 20*, pp. 419-420.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 1309 in *Works Vol. 23*, p. 270.

Due to its remarkably precise prophetic content, Daniel has long been under suspicion. Yet as Edwards poses the question, at which point was it simply inserted into the canon without a trace? Similar defences can be seen on behalf of other controversial books, such as Job.⁶³

Turning now to a stimulus arising from the other side of the theological spectrum, Edwards also took aim at those who made claims to new divine inspiration. Edwards strenuously affirmed the traditional position that the canon was completed with the Book of Revelation.

Christ, having given this last Revelation to his church to be added to the books of Scripture, [with] which the canon was to be shut up and sealed by the instrumentality of the apostle John, who lived the longest of the apostles and wrote this book after all the rest were dead: Christ therefore orders John (v. 10) to publish this book, [...] and then intimates that no more revelations are to be expected, no more instruction and warnings to be added to the word of God, as the standing means of grace, any further to confirm and enforce the rest...⁶⁴

The ‘enthusiasts’ of the day, made more numerous by the very awakenings Edwards defended so ably, thought that miraculous gifts including the gift of prophecy were available in their day. They did not usually presume to add to the canon of written Scripture, but Edwards and others nonetheless saw their openness to fresh revelations from God as amounting to this. This somewhat pressing problem was one that Edwards thought about throughout his career. His rejoinder was sometimes rather conventional, such as:

[The gifts] were bestowed on the prophets and apostles to enable them to reveal the mind and will of God before the canon of the Scripture was complete. [...] But since the canon of the Scripture has been completed, and the Christian church fully founded and established, those extraordinary gifts have ceased.⁶⁵

Edwards was also capable of a more exotic typological argument, as when he argues that Revelation 22:2 signifies that ‘The leaves of that tree which bears these twelve manner of fruits are the leaves of our Bibles’ and thus confirms that the canon of special revelation is complete.⁶⁶

⁶³ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 878, entitled ‘The Book of Job, Why Inserted into the Canon of Scripture.’ in *Works Vol. 20*, p. 120.

⁶⁴ Edwards. ‘Miscellany’ 1356 in *Works Vol. 23*, pp. 577-578.

⁶⁵ Edwards, ‘Charity and its Fruits’ in *Works Vol. 8*, p. 153.

⁶⁶ ‘Miscellany’ 1223 in *Works Vol. 23*, p. 156.

Edwards' most extensive statement on cessation, however, comes in the sermon on I Corinthians 13:8-13.⁶⁷ His doctrine was that 'The extraordinary influences of the Spirit of God, imparting immediate revelations to men, were designed only for a temporary continuance while the church was in its minority, and never were intended to be stately upheld in the Christian Church.'⁶⁸ His first application taught that:

Hence we may learn that it is not to be expected that any of those gifts that imply divine revelation should be bestowed in these days; because the canon of the Scripture has long since been complete, the church of God completely furnished with a standing rule of faith and practice, and the means of grace all settled and established, and therefore the great end of all these gifts is obtained.⁶⁹

Edwards provides four arguments for his position:

1. 'Tis an argument of it that our Bible nowhere speak of, or foretell, any further revelations of the mind and will of God to be given to his church.'⁷⁰
2. 'The Scriptures speak of the church of Christ as 'built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles'; and therefore, it will follow that when the apostles are all dead, this foundation is finished.'⁷¹
3. 'The word of the apostles is particularly spoken of in Scripture as the rule of the church of Christ in all succeeding times, and therefore when their word is finished, the rule is finished. [...] They that pretend in these days to immediate revelation, they take upon themselves to be an additional foundation.'⁷²
4. 'The words of the Holy Scripture in the conclusion of our Bibles do manifestly hold forth thus much to us: that now the canon of the Scripture is finished, the established means of grace completed, and that no further revelation must be expected to be made to the church to the end of the world.'⁷³

⁶⁷ Edwards, 'Graces of the Spirit,' sermon on I Cor. 13:8-13 in *Works Vol. 25*, pp. 279-311.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p. 281.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 287.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 288.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 289.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 290.

⁷³ *Ibid*, pp. 290-91.

These arguments are remarkable perhaps only for their precision and comprehension in communicating the seventeenth century Reformed orthodox position on cessation.

VI. The Illumination of Scripture

In Reformed thought generally, special revelation begins with the agency of the Holy Spirit acting upon canonical writers to produce Scripture—inspiration—and is completed with the agency of the Holy Spirit making it effectual in the heart of the believer—illumination. One way to think about illumination is simply to define it as the reversal of the noetic effects of sin. However, since Edwards located these deleterious effects primarily in the affections rather than in the intellect *per se*, his doctrine of illumination was also unusual in that it was entirely affectional in orientation. We return to the sermon on I Corinthians 13:8-13, where Edwards is contrasting illumination with inspiration:

Observe well the difference between spiritual illumination and immediate revelation. The former consists in a person's being enabled rightly to understand and see the evidence [of the gospel preached], and this is done by enabling persons to be inwardly sensible of the divine excellency, giving a new sense, [or] a new sense of [the] heart, a new spiritual relish, and so from the discovery of this divine excellency leading a person to a right view, and apprehension of the great evidence of the truth [of the Scriptures]: of the truths that are revealed already, that were in the Bible before and would have been before [apprehended] had it not been for sinful blindness.⁷⁴

As we have seen, Edwards' doctrine of revelation requires the coexistence of both notional and affectional communication, and thus suitable equipment for the reception of both streams must be operational. The truths of Scripture were already there to be observed by the unregenerate, but because of 'sinful blindness' they were not apprehended affectionally. Illumination is required to enable people to be 'inwardly sensible of the divine excellency' or in even more distinctively Edwardsean terms, to give 'a new sense of the heart' leading them to have a right view of the truth before them. Such illumination is always and only a supernatural ministry of the Holy Spirit.

This being the case, one may wonder how it could be possible that the unregenerate sometimes seem to have a pretty good grasp of revealed truth even in its aesthetic dimensions. Are these cases wherein natural affections are sufficient? Much as he did in other similar situations, Edwards found a theological resource to

⁷⁴ Edwards, sermon on I Cor. 13:8-13 in *Works Vol. 25*, pp. 303-304.

cope with this problem without granting the slightest iota to fallen humanity. This was Edwards' concept of 'common illumination.'

...the common convictions and illuminations that natural men have are in some respects the nature of the Spirit of God: for there is light and understanding and conviction of truth in these common illumination, and so they are of the nature of the Spirit of God—that is, a discerning spirit and a spirit of truth.⁷⁵

Edwards thought that the Holy Spirit was commonly active in the unregenerate, and that He often granted people 'light and understanding and conviction of truth.'

These were not saving graces, but were part of God's overall work of providence.

This concept is yet another manifestation of Edwards' basic proclivity to answer the Age of Reason with unyielding reference to divine supernatural agency.

As with other aspects of Edwards' doctrine of Scripture, illumination was also integrated into his apologetic strategy of demonstrating relational harmony:

Even the being of God can be made most rationally and demonstratively evident by divine revelation and by gracious spiritual illumination [...] And this is every whit as rational a way of being convinced of the being of God, as it is of being convinced of the being of a man who comes from an unknown region, and shows himself to us, and converses with us for a long time.⁷⁶

Once again, Edwards shows the depth of his intuition that the most appropriate means of demonstrating how you know that some Being exists is to explain that you are talking to Him. Of course, this kind of evidence would have been ruled out of court by Enlightenment canons of discourse by virtue of its inaccessibility to outside observers, but this was not ultimately a problem in Edwards' conception of the divine conversation held with regenerate humanity.⁷⁷

VI. Locke's 'Fundamentalism'

We have noted that the impetus for Edwards' defence of the necessity of special revelation came primarily from Deism. Similarly, the great bulk of his apologetic work addressing critical objections to Scripture was occasioned by writings advocating natural religion. But though the Deists represented the most obvious threat to the orthodox doctrine of Scripture in the early modern era, they

⁷⁵ Edwards, 'Treatise on Grace' in *Works Vol. 21*, p. 180.

⁷⁶ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 254 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 364.

⁷⁷ See Edwards, 'Miscellany' 204 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 339-340.

were not the only antagonists. Those such as the Unitarians who were agitating for a less radical upset of conventional Protestant hegemony also found that the path to their goals lay directly through the Reformation's foundation in its doctrine of Scripture, though perhaps requiring a less thoroughgoing demolition.

One example of this sort of challenge was the 'fundamentalism' of John Locke. Fundamentalism tends to be associated with conservatives reacting to liberalising forces by setting the *minimum* definition of Christianity, so that those who accept *less* than these fundamentals were not legitimate Christians. However, early in the 17th century, the Socinians and others on the left proposed a set of 'fundamental' articles of faith that were intended to be the *maximum* legal definition of Christianity—governments that required people to believe in *more* than these fundamentals were doing so illegitimately. This project was subsequently taken up by English Unitarians such as Locke, whose monumental contribution to it was *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695).⁷⁸ His thesis was that the only essential doctrine of Christianity is that Jesus is the Messiah. This claim may sound somewhat innocuous, but in 17th century England it was sufficiently subversive for the celebrated author of the *Essay* to write anonymously.⁷⁹ For although a considerable degree of religious liberty had been secured by the Glorious Revolution, it was specifically limited to Trinitarian Christianity. Locke dutifully allowed that many doctrines might very well be true, but his logic implied that the doctrine of the Trinity as a marker of lawful Christian faith was an artificial imposition, a point whose subversive force was not missed by his critics.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ The determination of Locke's private faith is complicated by political context, since the Toleration Act of 1689 specifically did not protect those who denied the Trinity (Act of Toleration, Ch. XXVII). We would therefore not expect Locke to be forthright had he harboured non-trinitarian beliefs. However, the bulk of the evidence seems to point to him being a Unitarian. See Victor Nuovo, 'Locke's Theology' and John Marshall, 'Locke, Socinianism, "Socinianism," and Unitarianism,' both in M. A. Stewart, ed., *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Dewey D. Wallace, 'Socinianism, Justification by Faith, and the Sources of John Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity*,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, (Jan 1984) pp.49-66; and Maurice Wiles, *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism Through the Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁷⁹ *The Reasonableness of Christianity as Delivered in the Scriptures* (London: A & J Churchill, 1695) was posthumously acknowledged by Locke through a provision in his will (Victor Nuovo, *John Locke and Christianity: Contemporary Response to The Reasonableness of Christianity* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1997) p. ix.), but suspicions to this effect circulated as soon as the book was published.

⁸⁰ Locke's most ardent critic on this issue was John Edwards (1637-1716), who wrote *Some Thoughts Concerning the Several Causes and Occasions of Atheism* (London: Robinson and Wyat, 1695), *Socinianism Unmask'd* (London: Robinson and Wyat, 1696), *A Brief Vindication of the Fundamental Articles of the Christian Faith* (London: Robinson and Wyat, 1697), *The Socinian Creed* (London: Robinson and Wyat, 1697), and *A Free but Modest Censure on the late Controversial Writings and Debates of Mr. Edwards and Mr. Locke* (London: Robinson and Wyat, 1697). See also John Milner (1628-1702), *An Account of Mr. Lock's religion* (London: Nutt, 1700).

Importantly for our subject, Locke could only accomplish his desired truncation of the Christian faith by limiting the material eligible for consideration as a fundamental doctrine to the four gospels. Locke specifically wanted to rule out the epistles:

...every Sentence of theirs [the writers of the Epistles] must not be taken up, and looked on as a Fundamental Article necessary to Salvation; without an explicit belief whereof, no body could be a Member of Christ's Church here, nor be admitted into his Eternal Kingdom hereafter. [...] May those Truths delivered in the Epistles, which are not contained in the Preaching of our Saviour and his Apostles, and are therefore by this Account not necessary to Salvation, be believed, or disbelieved without any danger? May a Christian safely question or doubt of them?⁸¹

In so doing, Locke was proposing a materially different understanding of Scripture. By asking rhetorically 'May a Christian safely doubt of them?' of the teachings of the epistles, he is in effect denying the necessity and authority of the whole of Scripture. Locke thus operates by way of textual and theological isolation, abstracting a certain part of Scripture from the interpretive control of the rest of the Bible and its theology.

Edwards takes up the issues raised by Locke in an early 'Miscellany.'⁸² His strategy here was primarily to reveal all the layers of truth that necessarily lay bound up in the single fundamental article advocated by Locke and others:

Then they say that [it] is necessary only to believe that Jesus Christ was a person come from God, they must be understood that it is necessary to believe that he was a person come from a true being... They also mean that he came from a merciful being, that did not send him to destroy mankind... He must also [believe] that that God he came from is wise, and that he knows how to profit mankind by sending Jesus; [...] So that, although they say it is only necessary to believe Jesus came from God, therein is implied that it is necessary to believe all these things: God's all-sufficiency, God's wisdom and omniscience, God's omnipotence, God's truth and faithfulness, God's mercy, God's holiness, God's justice, etc.⁸³

The few words 'Jesus is the Messiah' are as Edwards demonstrates densely packed with doctrinal content. Belief in this fundamental requires first of all a robust, orthodox doctrine of God. No less, it also requires an orthodox christology: 'Tis

⁸¹ Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, p. 297.

⁸² Edwards, 'Miscellany' ee in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 182-183.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

also necessary to believe that what he [Jesus] did had a tendency to obtain his end; and so, in short, they say the gospel scheme is necessary to be believed.’⁸⁴ He does not unpack this statement quite as much, but it seems that for Edwards, Jesus’ ability to secure redemption was predicated on his identity as the incarnate second person of the Trinity and that his atoning sacrifice was in fact efficacious. He concludes triumphantly ‘And so it will be found, that they own almost all the articles to be necessary which good Protestants all along have said to be necessary. So that difference is, that one expresses all in one comprehensive article, and others divide it to give us the meaning and full understanding of it.’⁸⁵

Thus far Edwards has addressed the theological problems with the fundamentalist’s abstraction, but he applies the same logic to the deficient doctrine of Scripture from which it arose. Just as one doctrine of Christianity implies a host of others—indeed, the whole system—so one part of the Bible is meaningless apart from, and is rightly understood to imply, the whole. This principle is epitomized by the Messiah’s identity as a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy:

Furthermore, in this article is implied, that it is necessary to be believed [...] that the good that he came to do was that that he said he came to do. And in order to believing this last, it is necessary to believe, that he said he came to do that which the Scripture saith he came to do; wherefore the divine authority of the Scriptures is one of their necessary articles.⁸⁶

Locke was happy to discuss doctrine found in the gospels while neglecting what came before and came after in the canon. Edwards points out that Jesus after all ‘said he came to do that which the Scripture saith he came to do.’ The Old Testament establishes the concept of the anointed one, Jesus declares that the events of his life to be the very fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, and therefore we are obliged to receive the Old Testament. Thus the Old Testament provides the necessary context to understand who Christ was.

What ‘the Scripture saith he came to do’ also includes the explication of what Christ did that God provides for us in the Epistles. In a late sermon, Edwards notes ‘There is a connection between the various parts of the Word of God [...] the word of the Apostles explains the word of the prophets... their word explains all and

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

completes all.’⁸⁷ The ‘word of the Apostles’ (including the Epistles) is part of an interconnected whole, giving vital meaning to the rest of Scripture. Thus, as Edwards concludes in ‘Miscellany’ ee, it is necessary to believe in ‘the divine authority of the Scriptures’ and not merely in isolated doctrines abstracted from the canon. This episode illustrates how Edwards was alert to the full range of problems posed by Enlightenment thought to the traditional doctrine of Scripture.

VII. Brown on Edwards’ Relation to Biblical Criticism

Closely related to the question of biblical authority was the increasingly prominent issue of biblical criticism. For those who wished to undermine Reformation understandings of biblical authority, biblical criticism became a gospel to preach to the unconverted and a cudgel to wield on the recalcitrant.⁸⁸ Edwards was very much involved in this struggle, although aspects of his work in this area have been historically underrepresented in the secondary literature. The pioneering work of Robert E. Brown, however, has addressed this lacuna.⁸⁹ This study acknowledges its debt to Brown while it takes up his invitation to continue the discussion.⁹⁰

Brown aptly describes the situation facing Edwards with regard to biblical criticism:

Deists and other skeptics were particularly keen to employ the results of the emerging field of biblical criticism in their attempts to undermine the Bible’s social authority. Their popularization of the ideas of critics such as Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, and Richard Simon helped to raise significant doubts about the historical and scientific reliability of the text—and a book without intellectual cogency was a book without religious authority. It was precisely this challenge to the Bible’s divine origins—and thereby its authority and relevance—to which Edwards’ theological reflections on the nature of the Bible were directed.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Edwards, ‘Extraordinary Gifts of the Spirit are Inferior to Graces of the Spirit’ sermon on I Cor. 13:8-13 in *Works Vol. 25*, pp. 288, 290.

⁸⁸ The seventeenth and eighteenth century liberals were of course preceded in this effort by Roman Catholic polemicists.

⁸⁹ Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002); and ‘The Bible’ in Sang Hyun Lee, ed. *The Princeton Companion to Jonathan Edwards*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 87-102. Brown’s PhD dissertation won the 1999 Brewer Prize for church history.

⁹⁰ See Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, p. 199.

⁹¹ Brown, ‘The Bible,’ p. 92.

Edwards needed to be involved in the biblical criticism of his day because that was the central front where the war over biblical authority was being fought.

Historical criticism is the logical course for those lacking orthodox presuppositions regarding the nature of the Bible. Those who think that the Bible not merely *arose out of* ordinary human history, but was entirely *caused* by its accidents, have no hope of understanding it without the context provided by an understanding of that causal history.⁹² It makes sense that Spinoza and Toland would want to read the Bible ‘as any other book’ and would engage in historical criticism to explain it.⁹³ It also makes sense that Jonathan Edwards, believing in the ultimate unity of all reality, would be unafraid to follow the sceptical critics in their work in order to expose their errors as well as to manifest the beautiful harmony inherent in the traditional account. What is less clear is how deeply Edwards accepted the critical enterprise, based as it was on presuppositions that were utterly anathema to him. It is on this issue of Edwards’ attitude toward criticism that certain statements in Brown’s assessment become debateable.

As a preliminary issue, we address the matter of Edwards’ approach to textual or ‘lower’ criticism. Brown states that ‘Edwards seems to have had *little or no reservations* about the fact, for example, that in their present form the received texts of the Old and New Testaments *required serious emendation*.’⁹⁴ The evidence he cites for this assessment are two ‘Catalogue’ entries where Edwards notes that he would like to acquire critical editions of the Hebrew and Greek texts.⁹⁵ It is moreover true that Edwards never preached nor commented on the thoroughly repudiated text of I John 5:7-8.⁹⁶ On the other hand, Edwards devoted a lengthy ‘Blank Bible’ entry to the adulterous woman passage in John 8 and preached on the long ending of Mark 16 as late as 1752.⁹⁷ Based on this evidence, whereby Edwards *probably* accepted precisely one substantive emendation, however many he might

⁹² See Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, pp. 33-34.

⁹³ See Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 42-46.

⁹⁴ Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, p. 93; emphasis mine.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Turretin defended the long version of I John 5:7-8. See Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, p. 115. Brown notes that Edwards’ silence on this text is ‘a strange silence, but perhaps not too much should be made from it...’. Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, p. 101.

⁹⁷ Edwards, ‘Blank Bible’ entry on John 8:6 in *Works Vol. 24*; Edwards, ‘What is Meant by Believing in Christ,’ sermon on Mark 16:15-16 in McMullen, ed., *The Blessing of God: Previously Unpublished Sermons by Jonathan Edwards* (Nashville: Broadman, 2003), pp. 237-246.

hypothetically have been willing to consider, the statement that he had ‘little or no reservations’ about the received texts requiring ‘serious emendation’ seems to say too much.

A similar tendency seems to be present in the issue of Edwards’ attitude towards higher criticism. The expected approach to characterising Edwards in relation to biblical criticism might have been to assign him a place in Hans Frei’s basic framework of critical or pre-critical.⁹⁸ But Brown finds no such clear distinction in the eighteenth century, encountering instead a rather unstructured continuum of attitudes towards the Bible including conservatives who were more open to criticism than might be imagined and critics more respectful of the text than previously thought. Muller’s recent study of Protestant orthodoxy of the era supports Brown on this point.⁹⁹ Brown therefore offers a nuanced assessment of Edwards, suggesting that ‘his approach was really a kind of hybrid traditionalism, one modified in significant ways by his accommodations to the new learning.’¹⁰⁰ Whether Brown’s descriptions of ‘hybrid traditionalism’ and ‘modified in significant ways by his accommodations to the new learning’ are accurate depends of course on how these words are to be understood. A more specific statement of what he means comes in *The Princeton Companion*:

[Edwards] was completely enamored with the modern intellectual enterprise and accepted its claims to produce real knowledge about the world. *In many cases this meant that he had to adjust his interpretation of the Bible.* This is most clearly illustrated, perhaps, in his attempts to adjust biblical cosmology and eschatology to Newtonian astronomy and physics.¹⁰¹

Brown’s contention that Edwards ‘had to adjust his interpretation of the Bible’ in ‘many cases’ is problematic. Given the potentially controversial nature of such a statement, one might have wished that it be supported by multiple examples in the primary sources. As it is, the reference seems to point only to a series of related notebook entries culminating in ‘Miscellany’ 931 in which Edwards theorises about

⁹⁸ See Frei, *Eclipse*. Although Edwards features in *Types of Christian Theology*, Frei does not mention Edwards in *Eclipse*.

⁹⁹ Muller writes that there is ‘no clear or sudden division between “pre-critical” and “critical exegesis.”’ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725*. 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1987-2003), pp. 134-135.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, p. xvii.

¹⁰¹ Brown, ‘The Bible,’ p. 96; emphasis mine.

the physics involved in the eschatological conflagration.¹⁰² If this is indeed the clearest illustration of the phenomena Brown wishes to establish, then the statement is resting upon shaky ground. Even if this episode could be construed as a case where Edwards adjusted his interpretation of the Bible to fit the findings of the modern intellectual enterprise, it is an apparently exceptional situation concerning some theologically insignificant details of eschatology. This kind of example seems ill suited to support a generalised statement that very much runs counter to Edwards' explicit teachings establishing the absolute priority of Scripture in interpreting other data.¹⁰³

It seems, however, that upon closer examination the episode in question does not even provide this much support. Edwards' main idea in these 'Miscellanies' is rather straightforward: his reading of the Bible informed him that the world would be destroyed in the course of six days (a supposition apparently based more on symmetry with the Genesis creation account than with any direct biblical statement), the destruction would include the falling of the stars and that humans would see this happen. Yet the relatively advanced optical physics of Newtonian science told him that the stars are many light years away, and would take much longer than six days to traverse the distance to us.¹⁰⁴ Now going by Brown's statement, we might have expected Edwards to conclude that Revelation must be speaking symbolically or that the destruction will take longer than six days. Neither of these would require violating any authoritatively received interpretation of the relevant texts, and Edwards is therefore free to make such a move were he inclined to 'adjust his interpretation of the Bible' in light of modern learning. Contrary to such an expectation, Edwards concludes that the stars will move at speeds much greater than light, and that human eyes will be altered accordingly so as to be able to observe the super-light revealing their dramatic motions.¹⁰⁵ It is actually the 'Newtonian astronomy and physics' that are being adjusted to fit biblical eschatology, and precisely not the other way around. Edwards would rather propose something that would be deemed scientifically impossible than to alter some minor point for which

¹⁰² Brown's endnotes are to Stephen Stein's editorial introductions in the Yale Edition of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* Volumes 5 and 15 and to his own book, but the exact referent in the primary works is not made clear. I presume he is referring to 'Miscellanies' 926, 929, 930 and 931 in *Works Vol. 20*.

¹⁰³ See the discussion of Edwards' position of biblical authority, above.

¹⁰⁴ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 931 in *Works Vol. 20*, pp. 175-185; see also 'Miscellanies' 926, 929, and 930 in *Works Vol. 20*.

¹⁰⁵ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 931 in *Works Vol. 20*, pp. 175-185; see also 'Miscellanies' 926, 929, and 930 in *Works Vol. 20*.

he thought he had even scant biblical support. Brown's case, if it rests on this episode, is less than convincing.

We are, in fact, not aware of any case in which critical thought or the findings of modern science compelled Edwards to adjust his interpretation of the Bible in any meaningful way. He clearly did use the findings of natural revelation to flesh out what he had in skeletal form in Scripture, but not to alter it. Thus in the case of his teaching on hell, he used Newtonian physics to add some colourful detail (that hell was most likely fuelled by the fires of former stars) to the same, traditional, biblically derived doctrine he already had (that unrepentant sinners would go to a place of eternal torment that included some form of fire.)¹⁰⁶ This is of course precisely what we might expect of one committed to the ultimate harmony of all forms of revelation, and who believed in the priority of Scripture over reason. If we happened to find a case where Edwards really did adjust his interpretation of the Bible to fit modern learning, we would have to conclude that he was acting contrary to his principles.

Brown also says that Edwards 'accepted the legitimacy of modern canons of historical investigation.'¹⁰⁷ This is again problematic. If Brown has in mind merely issues such as the accumulation of evidence and the use of reliable testimony, then the statement is as true of Edwards as it would be for virtually any other figure of his age. However, 'canons' often imply far more than basic methodological considerations. Edwards believed in the primacy of divine agency in history as made known through inspired prophecy and the *a priori* ruling out of the possibility of any real discrepancy between extra-biblical data and the Bible itself, items that are hardly what is typically meant by modern canons of historical investigation.¹⁰⁸ Edwards' rejection of the canons of modern historical investigation in this deeper sense most particularly applied to the interpretation of the Bible.¹⁰⁹ In his notebook 'Efficacious Grace,' Edwards is addressing the various specious arguments the Arminians and Deists used to support their conception of libertarian free will.¹¹⁰ Edwards says that

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Brown, 'The Bible,' p. 96.

¹⁰⁸ See the discussion of Edwards' doctrine of history in Chapter 5, below.

¹⁰⁹ Brown rightly considers that 'historical thought' and 'critical biblical interpretation' 'were nearly inseparable for Edwards and his contemporaries.' Brown, *Jonathan Edwards and the Bible*, p. 89.

¹¹⁰ Possibly because it was being prepared for publication at the time Brown was writing and thus unavailable for his consultation, material used in Volume 21 of the Yale Edition does not appear. Brown's quote from 'Efficacious Grace' on p. 94 of his book happens to be from the entry immediately preceding to the one discussed here, but Brown is quoting from Minkema 'The Other Unfinished "Great Work"' in Stephen J. Stein, ed. *Jonathan Edwards's Writings: Text, Context*,

‘Scripture expressions are everywhere exceeding contrary to their scheme, according to all use of language in the world in these days.’ But they found in the modern historical critical enterprise a likely avenue to advance their cause:

But then they have their refuge here: they say the ancient figures of speech are exceeding diverse from ours, and that we in this distant age can’t judge at all of the true force of expression used so long ago but by a skill in antiquity, and being versed in ancient history, and critically skilled in the ancient languages—never considering that the Scriptures are written for us in these ages, on whom the ends of the world are come, yea, were designed chiefly for the later age of the world, in which they shall have their chief and, comparatively, almost all their effect; and they were written for God’s people in these ages, of whom at least 99 in an hundred must be supposed incapable of such knowledge by their circumstances and education, and 999 in a thousand of God’s people that hitherto have been saved by the Scriptures.¹¹¹

It would be difficult to conceive of a statement more categorically dismissive of the basic presuppositions of the critical approach to biblical interpretation. Moreover, Edwards is writing this statement in the very context of refuting Arminianism, demonstrating that Edwards considered modern biblical criticism and heterodox theology to be natural allies.

As we conclude this section, it might be worth pointing out that Brown’s work often presents a picture of Edwards that is entirely reconcilable with the one presented here. Consider the following:

Despite his consuming interest in such interpretive problems, Edwards himself was not a critic, in the sense of being sceptical about the Bible’s historical or religious integrity, or in the sense of employing a thoroughgoing historical analysis in his resolution of interpretive problems....Edwards immersed himself in modern criticism principally to head off its potentially destructive implications for the Bible’s authority.¹¹²

We could only concur with this statement. However, as we have seen, Brown also said some things that seem to be at odds with such sentiments and which have invited further discussion. In the context of a systematic study of Edwards’ theology of revelation, it is an important point to determine exactly how much—if anything—Edwards was willing to concede to critical presuppositions. It would seem to us that

Interpretation (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 57.

¹¹¹ Edwards, ‘Efficacious Grace’ in *Works Vol. 21*, p. 232.

¹¹² Brown, ‘The Bible,’ p. 95.

he wielded the tools of modern biblical criticism superficially while rejecting its project entirely. If we therefore had to give Edwards a place in Frei's framework, we would place him in the vicinity of Owen squarely on the pre-critical segment.¹¹³ Edwards no doubt thought that the results of any correctly oriented investigation would harmonise perfectly with the scriptural account, but an orientation *predicated* on the absolute authority of the Bible was the very point at issue. We should not at all be surprised if Edwards incorporated the findings of science and history into his unfinished project of demonstrating the harmony of all knowledge under divine communicative purposes. We should, however, wonder if he really accepted the canons established by his theological adversaries.

IX. Conclusion

Our discussion of Edwards' doctrine of Scripture has contained at least three themes that integrate with the larger story of Edwards' doctrine of revelation. One theme is Edwards' pervasive desire to demonstrate the harmony of all knowledge, a desire explained by his understanding of God's project in communicating himself multi-dimensionally to intelligent creatures. Another would be the *use* of harmony as an apologetic method, as the seal of trinitarian character that ties together the Scriptures and proves their authority as divine revelation. The third theme would be Edwards' rejection at the deepest level of virtually every aspect of the Enlightenment's critical approach toward the Bible. We as fallen humanity are fully and completely dependent upon the Scriptures and the Triune God who gave them for efficacious knowledge of saving truth.

We conclude with a quotation from the 'Miscellanies' that would seem to summarize Edwards' attitude toward the revealed Word of God as it points to the larger theological picture:

It seems to me that God would have our whole dependence be upon the Scriptures, because the greater our dependence is on the Word of God, the more direct and immediate is our dependence on God himself. The more absolute and entire our dependence on the Word of God is, the greater respect shall we have to that Word, the more shall we esteem and honor and prize it; and this respect to the Word of God will lead us to have the greater respect to God himself.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ In passing, it is interesting to note that Brown and Muller, both writing primarily as historians of doctrine, do not see the clear distinction posited by Frei, writing more as a systematic theologian.

¹¹⁴ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 535 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 80. Edwards' context was actually to critique a dependence on the Fathers, an attitude that obviously predated the Enlightenment.

It is with this statement on the priority of Scripture that we proceed to discuss Edwards' thoughts on God's communication through history and providence.

Chapter 5

The Harmony of History

‘If [the setting up of Christ’s kingdom] were done at once, in an instant or in a very short time, there would not be opportunity for the creature to perceive and observe all the particular steps of divine wisdom, as when the work is gradually accomplished and one effect of his wisdom is held forth to observation after another...’

—Jonathan Edwards, *The History of the Work of Redemption*¹

I. Introduction

In a recent book on the theology of Hans Frei, Mike Higton observes that, for Frei ‘...theology as an intellectual discipline never stands far from history. It understands that history is the arena in which God works—or better, the idiom in which God speaks.’² These words might as well have been said of an earlier American theologian whom Frei held in high esteem, and for whom history was similarly integral.³ Although it would be impossible to isolate history entirely from the whole of Edwards’ theology, it is perhaps best understood from the perspective of revelation. Edwards understood history as the temporal vehicle for the work of redemption, the work that above all else affords the fullest disclosure of the divine character. Edwards thus believed that the history of redemption offered vast resources for knowing—and so for loving and enjoying—God, and it occupies an appropriately prominent position in his corpus.

This chapter explores what it meant for Edwards to understand history as a medium of divine revelation.⁴ We shall first establish some of the most important elements involved in this understanding, such as Edwards’ resolute supernaturalism and his conviction that history was demonstrably harmonious with the content of Scripture. We shall then illustrate some of the ways this thinking was manifested in

¹ *Works Vol. 9*, p. 355.

² Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History: Hans W. Frei’s Public Theology* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2004), p. 1.

³ See *ibid*, p. 171. Edwards was moreover Frei’s eighteenth century example of his favoured fourth ‘type’ of theology. See Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 4.

⁴ Not that this in any way implies that Edwards saw history as *special* revelation, the canon of which he believed to be closed. See the discussion on the canon above, chapter 4.

Edwards' work, including not only the famous 'History of the Work of Redemption' project but also some lesser-known items that likewise demonstrate how seriously and consistently Edwards took the implications of God revealing himself through the providential workings of redemptive history. We begin with the now-familiar theme of Edwards' uncompromising opposition to Enlightenment thought forms, here pursued in relation to history.

II. Historiographer of Super-nature

As with his treatments of nature and Scripture, Edwards' interpretation of history as the harmonious expression of God's sovereign causality was at irreconcilable odds with modernity.⁵ Indeed, Enlightenment-influenced models of history have so long dominated the intellectual landscape that Edwards' vision necessarily appears strange today. This is because Edwards was, above all, an observer and interpreter of *supernatural* history. As we consider this feature, we must once again refer to Edwards' comprehensive campaign against a whole spectrum of rationalist thinking and theology. Inasmuch as this theology had a core conviction lying behind its various concerns, it would seem to be a basic hostility to supernaturalism in any form. It was into this heart that Edwards sought to plunge the stake of an historical record alive with the supernatural workings of the living God.

The Enlightenment concept of history was perhaps epitomised by David Hume in *The Natural History of Religion* and *The History of England*.⁶ Hume presupposed the purely human causes of events working without exception throughout time, seeking in his narrative to highlight these entirely natural causes in order to undermine the 'prevailing systems of superstition.'⁷ In radical contrast to Hume's project, Edwards presupposed and sought to make manifest to his audience the *divine* causation that sometimes worked abruptly to bring about milestones in the building of Christ's kingdom. Take for example what was then the relatively recent case of the Glorious Revolution. Hume and Edwards both view this event as a positive development, but they explain it and understand its significance in very

⁵ See also Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards's Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 5-13, 226-234.

⁶ Hume, *The Natural History of Religion and Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) and *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983.)

⁷ '...I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the Public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition.' Hume, quoted in Stanley Tweyman, ed., *Hume on Natural Religion* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996.)

different terms. Hume understands the significance of 1688 entirely politically, and is at pains to elucidate the human factors that render the dramatic and seemingly unlikely turn of events explicable:

The time, when the prince [of Orange] entered on his enterprise, was well chosen; as the people were then in the highest ferment, on account of the insult, which the imprisonment and trial of the bishops had put upon the church, and indeed upon all the protestants of the nation. His method of conducting his preparations was no less wise and politic.... The king [James II] every moment alarmed, more and more, by these proofs of a general disaffection, not daring to repose trust in any but those who were exposed to more danger than himself, agitated by disdain towards ingratitude, by indignation against disloyalty, impelled by his own fears and those of others, precipitately embraced the resolution of escaping into France.⁸

The near-miraculous nature of William's successful invasion was only apparent; when all the details of the historical record and of human motivations were examined, the outcome becomes completely understandable.

Edwards, on the other hand, understands the significance of the Glorious Revolution within the frame of redemptive history: God intervened just in time to check the reintroduction of Roman Catholicism in England. He records the main outlines of the event only to explain it simply as a sudden divine intervention:

And just as their matters seemed to be come to an head, and their enterprise ripe for execution, God in his providence suddenly dashed all their schemes in pieces by the revolution at the coming in of King William and Queen Mary, by which all their designs were at an end.⁹

It is not that the details of providence, which very much include human instrumentation, are wholly to be ignored. Edwards in other places would go into minute detail to show the wisdom of God in his precise ordering of events. However, unlike Hume, these things are not ultimately the point. For Edwards, the real protagonist in history is always God and the unified plot always the work of redemption, and good historical narrative must reflect these parameters.

Edwards was thus fundamentally an historian of the supernatural. This point might appear rather basic perhaps, but it has not always been maintained with due care. Take for example a typically arresting yet incomplete statement from Perry Miller. He writes that, for Edwards, 'Nature—or history, which is nature in time—

⁸ David Hume, *The History of England*, Vol. 6, part lxxi.

⁹ Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption in Works Vol. 9*, p. 426.

was not a disjointed series of phenomena; it was a living system of theology, it was a complete, intelligible whole.’¹⁰ Nature and history are indeed part of a ‘living system’ in Edwards’ theology of revelation, and at this level Miller’s observation is right on target. If the whole of reality is the instantaneous self-communication of the divine mind in continual creation, history is essentially the series of such ontologically real communications over time. However, it is important to state that Edwards also maintained a crucial distinction between natural and the supernatural, such that although history includes ‘nature in time,’ more to Edwards’ point, it features *super-nature* in time. And it is the intelligent appreciation of God’s supernatural actions in redemptive history that is indeed the glorious purpose of everything else.

One might ask what is the basis of Edwards’ distinction between nature and super-nature. Such a distinction would indeed appear rather arbitrary in light of Edwards’ radically theocentric doctrine of ‘continuous creation’ wherein all phenomena have an immediate and momentary supernatural cause.¹¹ It is possible that Edwards did not in fact achieve a fully satisfactory philosophical resolution of this tension, but the requisite discussion is beyond our scope. For the present purposes, we can say that Edwards predicated his distinction upon secondary causation, such that supernatural means whatever God accomplishes without the usual layer of intermediate means.¹² This concept is evident in Edwards’ famous sermon ‘A Divine and Supernatural Light,’ here applied to the problem of theological epistemology:

God is the author of all knowledge and understanding whatsoever.... Mortal men are capable of imparting the knowledge of human arts and sciences, and skill in temporal affairs. God is the author of such knowledge by those means: flesh and blood is made use of by God as the mediate or second cause of it; he conveys it by the power and influence of natural means. But this spiritual knowledge, spoken of in the text, is what God is the author of, and none else: he reveals it, and flesh and blood reveal it not. He imparts this knowledge immediately, not making use of any intermediate natural causes, as he does in other knowledge.¹³

¹⁰ Perry Miller, ed., *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948), pp. 28-29.

¹¹ See the discussion on Edwards’ doctrine of continuous creation in Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace & God of Glory* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), pp. 92-94.

¹² Edwards was not always precise in his use of ‘immediate’; he sometimes intended to indicate some level of *relative* immediacy rather than to assert *absolute* immediacy.

As with every aspect of reality, God ultimately stands behind all kinds of knowledge. What distinguishes the ‘spiritual’ or supernatural is the omission of the usual ‘intermediate natural causes.’¹⁴

Theologically, we might expect that the work of the Holy Spirit in a given situation would be proof positive of the supernatural. However, Edwards’ sermon teaches that the Spirit’s mere involvement need not mean that the accompanying phenomenon will be supernatural:

...this light and conviction [in natural men] may be from the Spirit of God; the Spirit convinces men of sin: but yet nature is much more concerned in it than in the communication of that spiritual and divine light, that is spoken of in the doctrine; ’tis from the Spirit of God only as assisting natural principles, and not as infusing any new principles.¹⁵

Flowing from his very robust doctrine of common grace in which the Spirit is engaged in all manner of work in natural humanity, there is not a one-to-one correlation between the Spirit’s working and the spiritual.¹⁶ For a given work to be properly spiritual, it must involve the infusion of ‘new principles’ having no natural antecedent.

Having thus outlined the theological basis for Edwards’ distinction between natural and supernatural, we consider how this applies to the reading of history. Edwards explores the topic in the context of a defence of special providence:

Seeing that God is certainly an intelligent and voluntary being, it is rational to suppose that in his government of the world there should not only be a series of events that he brings to pass in a constant uninterrupted series, by certain fixed unvaried laws, such as the laws of nature; but that he should manifest himself in his dealings with his intelligent and voluntary creatures in a series of more arbitrary acts and dispensations, not confined to certain unalterable rules and laws in all circumstances, but acts done more in the manner of intelligent voluntary creatures, and more directly showing the will and arbitrament of the governor, as it is in God’s dispensations towards his church from the beginning of the world, both in the extraordinary dispensations of his providence in miracles, and the arbitrary influences of his Spirit on their hearts, in the course of his ordinary dispensations in his church and kingdom.¹⁷

¹³ Edwards, ‘A Divine and Supernatural Light’ in *Works Vol. 17* p. 409.

¹⁴ Given the title of Edwards’ sermon, ‘A Divine and *Supernatural* Light’ as well as its content, it is legitimate to assume a functional equivalence between ‘spiritual’ and ‘supernatural’ here.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 410.

¹⁶ See *ibid*.

Just as Edwards thought that it is reasonable that God would converse with his intelligent creatures in special revelation, Edwards here thinks it is rational to suppose that an intelligent God ‘should manifest himself in his dealings with his intelligent and voluntary creatures in a series of more arbitrary acts and dispensations.’¹⁸ Thus Edwards locates supernatural events such as miracles not so much in the voluntary divine causation behind them, but in the voluntary or arbitrary *appearance* of the event as we observe it, precisely as it is a deviation from the ordinary course of God’s routine providence. In other words, God communicates to his creatures through the medium of history most clearly in those happenings that are least explicable in Humean terms.

Edwards’ supernaturalism as it relates to history is therefore essentially semiotic: the relatively arbitrary appearance of events provides the basis for our observation of God’s intentional communicative activity. Edwards thus observed history and current events expecting to find such intentionally arbitrary or supernatural events. Not, however, that this history stood alone as self-intelligible data. As with nature, history accomplishes its full revelatory purposes only within a hermeneutical nexus built from special revelation, and only within regenerate minds supernaturally enabled to appreciate the complex trinitarian harmony that is the mark of God’s authorship.¹⁹ We now consider the spectrum of ways in which Edwards thinks God is able to demonstrate his arbitrary hand in history along with some relevant implications.

III. Typology, Harmony and Prophecy

Thus far, we have discussed Edwards’ approach to history as a revelatory medium in terms of its sheer apparent deviation from natural causation. However, the ‘arbitrariness’ marking God’s intentionality could take a range of forms, some of which are more subtle and intricate. As with the other media of revelation, Edwards therefore relied upon an interconnected hermeneutical web to ascertain communicative content. The primary framework for this web came from Scripture, comprising both the relevant points of its unified theology and, more specifically in the context of history, its prophecy. It was this inspired intimation of God’s plan for the general flow of redemptive history—and at points, even its minute detail—that

¹⁷ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 749 in *Works Vol. 18*, pp. 397-398.

¹⁸ See above, chapter 3 section V.

¹⁹ See above, chapters 2 and 4.

enabled Edwards to derive valid revelatory content from uninspired sources. Secondary to this framework was the use of a typological hermeneutic, a recurring feature of Edwards' interpretation of revelation, in which events are related typologically to fixed theological features of the perspicuous inspired framework. Underlying the entire enterprise was the concept of Trinitarian harmony, enabling Edwards to recognise in history an incredibly complex yet beautiful pattern of God's self-revelation.

The framework provided by Edwards' systematic theology must be largely passed over, but we are mindful that he did not turn to history to find any new doctrines. To invoke a metaphor of the stage, Scripture provides the inspired programme guide to God's performance in redemptive history.²⁰ Thus, although in Edwards' perspective it was preferable to view firsthand the great show in its final dramatic acts, one would still be able to know what was needful simply by reading the biblical programme. Furthermore, any observation of the show that seemed to be at odds with the programme was necessarily a failure of harmonisation; for the show's omnipotent director was also the programme's omniscient author.

Typology has already occupied a fair amount of attention in the current work, but suffice it to say that Edwards approached fine details of history in much the same way he did those of nature. He assumed that the virtuoso behind these media of revelation packed a layer of spiritual meaning into virtually everything—'I am not afraid to own that I believe the whole universe, heaven and earth, air and seas, and the divine constitution and history of the holy Scriptures, be full of the images of divine things, as full as a language is of words.'²¹ There are many examples of the application of Edwards' typological theory to history in the 'Types' notebook, but entry 81 provides the most succinct: 'The Roman triumph was a remarkable type of Christ's ascension.'²² The ritual of the Roman triumph, which Edwards learned of from non-inspired historical sources, was not merely a suitable *illustration* of Christ's ascension, but an historical type intentionally instituted by God much as the sun was 'designed on purpose' as a natural type of the Trinity.²³

²⁰ See above, chapters 3 and 4.

²¹ Edwards, 'Types' in *Works Vol. 11*, p. 152. See also 'Miscellany' 362 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 434-435.

²² 'Types' entry 81 in *Works Vol. 11*, p. 82.

²³ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 362 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 434.

The status Edwards gives to non-inspired historical sources deserves some discussion at this point. One simply cannot lose sight of Edwards' voluminous work arguing for the necessity and uniquely privileged status of inspired Scripture.²⁴ However, in accordance with Edwards' expansive understanding of general revelation, he yet allowed a sizable place for the use of extra-biblical history. Edwards discloses some of his thoughts on the matter in the following statement, made within the very context of an argument for the necessity of Scripture: 'And in general, it was necessary that we should have a history of God's church till such times as come within our view and reach, that we might have some tolerable account of it without revelation.'²⁵ Edwards' implication seems to be that, in God's providence, human culture after the close of the Canon *was* sufficiently advanced as to be able to provide a 'tolerable account' of church history for our use. If so, Edwards would therefore seem to be able to make use of this imperfect yet serviceable historical record at least in some ways akin to the scriptural historical narratives. Edwards' practise of typologising extra-biblical historical events and of interpreting some of them as specific fulfilments of prophecy in a manner paralleling his use of biblical history would appear to support this understanding.²⁶

As 'Miscellany' 777 is in many ways vital to Edwards' larger theology of revelation, so 'Types' entry 77 is important for understanding his approach to discerning the hand of God in the oft perplexing contours of history. Edwards explains by expositing typologically the familiar New England example of a river basin comprised of a bewildering network of streams:

There is a wonderful analogy between what is seen in RIVERS: their gathering from innumerable small branches beginning at a great distance on from another in different regions, some on the sides or tops of mountains, others in valleys, and all conspiring to one common issue... The innumerable streams, of which great rivers are constituted, running in such infinitely various and contrary courses, lively represent the various dispensations of divine providence.... I need not run the parallel between this and the course of God's providence through all ages, from the beginning to the end of the world, when all things shall have their final issue in God....²⁷

²⁴ See above, chapter 3.

²⁵ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 359 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 432.

²⁶ See Stein, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 15*, pp. 2-3.

²⁷ Edwards, 'Types' entry 77 in *Works Vol. 11*, pp. 77-79.

Edwards acknowledges that the reading of history is in no easy matter. From a close perspective, it can appear as if particular streams of events are running utterly counter to God's purposes made known in the programme of Scripture. But even these apparent reversals eventually have a 'common issue' in the work of redemption. What was called for was some interpretive account of history that would map out the sometime confusing turns of providence to its human observer, a *desideratum* Edwards wanted to address in the 'History of the Work of Redemption.' This reconciliation of history would be a key component of his attempt to demonstrate the harmony of all reality as reflective of the complex harmony inherent in the Trinity.²⁸

Another element of Edwards' understanding of history as it relates to revelation was his explanation of the drawn-out nature of the building of Christ's kingdom. Edwards poses the question as to why 'the setting up of Christ's kingdom after his humiliation should be so gradual, by so many steps that are so long in accomplishment, when God could easily have finished it at once.'²⁹ Edwards here expresses the principle that God's project of self-revelation to finite creatures can be accomplished only in time:

In this way the glory of God's wisdom in the manner of doing this is more visible to the creature's observation. If it were done at once, in an instant or in a very short time, there would not be opportunity for the creature to perceive and observe all the particular steps of divine wisdom, as when the work is gradually accomplished and one effect of his wisdom is held forth to observation after another. 'Tis wisely determined of God to accomplish his great design by a wonderful and long series of events, that the glory of his wisdom may be displayed in the whole series and that the glory of his perfections may be seen as appearing, as it were, by parts and in particular successive manifestations. For if all that glory that appears in all these events should be manifested at once, it would be too much for us and more than we at once could take notice of; it would dazzle our eyes and be too much for our sight.³⁰

We already know that God's purpose in creation was to communicate himself to finite intelligent creatures. Edwards thus does not hesitate to say that Christ prolongs his warfare in this world just so that God's wisdom might be 'more visible to the creature's observation.' As we shall see in the case of the redemptive-historical

²⁸ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 182 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 329.

²⁹ Edwards, *History of the Work of Redemption*, in *Works Vol. 9*, p. 355.

³⁰ Edwards, *ibid.*, pp. 355-356.

beatific vision, the temporal implications of God's revelatory project were something Edwards took with utmost seriousness throughout his work.

Providing more detailed control to the observation and interpretation of redemptive history—perhaps furnishing the scene headings in our stage metaphor—was biblical prophecy. Prophecy was the pre-eminent means of God publicly exercising lordship over his creation, and Edwards held the usual Reformed orthodox position that the ability to accurately foretell future events was a component of divine identity. 'Miscellany' 1193 makes this point:

Great changes in kingdoms and nations coming to pass according to God's prediction is often spoken of by God himself in the Old Testament as a great evidence of his being the only true God, vastly distinguished from all other gods and infinitely above 'em...³¹

This principle has particular application to Jesus' claim to being God, and Edwards later cites as apologetic evidence Christ's prediction of the destruction of the Jerusalem in AD 70. Edwards finds the mini-apocalypse in the synoptic Gospels as a potent apologetic argument precisely because the events foretold were in themselves so unlikely when spoken.³²

Such views of the apologetic value of fulfilled prophecy were standard among Edwards' tradition. Slightly less standard, but certainly not unprecedented among colonial Puritans, was Edwards' consuming interest in the detailed interpretation of biblical prophecy as it was being fulfilled in more recent history and contemporary events.³³ A large volume of manuscript material, much of which can be sampled in *Volume 5: Apocalyptic Writings*, is taken up with Edwards' lifelong efforts along these lines. Edwards' private interest in correlating the pages of Revelation with the newspapers occasionally spilled over into published writings, as when he infamously suggested that the glorious times might possibly have dawned with the revivals in America.³⁴ But Edwards was not alone in such interests. Large tracts of the notebooks are in fact devoted to gleaning from other similarly minded authors, such as lengthy extracts from Moses Lowman's *Paraphrase and Notes*.³⁵

³¹ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 1193 in *Works Vol. 23*, p. 114.

³² Edwards, 'Miscellany' 1316 in *Works Vol. 23*, pp. 279-280.

³³ See Stein, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol 5*, p. 8; see also C. C. Goen, 'Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology,' *Church History* 28 (1959): 25-40.

³⁴ See *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival* in *Works Vol. 4*, p. 353.

³⁵ Edwards, *Works Vol. 5*, pp. 219-250.

The concurrence Edwards found in Lowman³⁶ in particular seems to have emboldened Edwards in a more public direction.³⁷

Understanding how specific prophecies were fulfilled in history was a demanding and possibly dubious enterprise, yet it was required by Edwards' theology of revelation. The main reason why God revealed his plans prophetically was so that his intelligent creatures would recognise their outworking in reality and participate in their further advancement:

It is an argument of the truth of the Christian revelation; for there is nothing else that informs what God's design [is in] that series of revolutions and events that are brought to pass in the [world], what end he seeks, and what scheme he has laid out.... 'Tis most fit that the intelligent beings of the world should be made acquainted with it; they are the beings that are principally concerned in it... And then 'tis rational to suppose, that God should reveal the design he has [been] carrying on to his rational creatures: that as God has made them capable of it, they may [be] actively falling in with it and promoting it, and acting herein as the subjects and friends of God.³⁸

We see again Edwards' insistence that the elucidation of God's plans for human history sets Christianity apart from other false religions and authenticates its Scriptures apologetically. More to the present point, however, is the larger, positive purpose that he posits for prophecy. God reveals his 'design' to intelligent creatures (angels and humans) so that they might be equipped for 'actively falling in with it and promoting it.' God's project of self-communication in Edwards' view was that it was intended not merely to provide information, but to enable them to re-emanate actively the revelation they receive. Edwards' construction of a detailed eschatological account incorporating the events of his day thereby takes on a new meaning when we consider how his theology demanded that his readership *act* as well as reflect upon their situation in history.

³⁶ With the notable exception of the interpretation of the 6th vial in Revelation 16:12, which, *contra* Lowman, Edwards believed was being fulfilled in his own day in the financial ruination of Roman Catholic nations. See 'An Account of Events Probably Fulfilling the Sixth Vial on the River Euphrates, The News of Which was Received Since October 16, 1747' in *Works Vol. 5*, pp. 253-284.

³⁷ 'One public measure of the impact of Lowman upon Edwards was the series of sermons he preached between March and August of 1739, published posthumously as *A History of the Work of Redemption* (1774).' (Stein, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 5*, p.22)

³⁸ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 547 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 95.

IV. The Development of Edwards' Use of History

In our discussion thus far, it has become plain that Edwards' theology was conceived in a way that would give history great prominence. However, although the relevant theoretical fundamentals were in place from the outset, the fuller realisation of the theological potential for history grew over the course of Edwards' career. This is seen particularly in Edwards' shift of apologetic/polemic master project from the 'Rational Account' to the 'History of the Work of Redemption.' As discussed in chapter 3, much of the earlier notebook material was intended for inclusion into Edwards' planned great work entitled 'A Rational Account of the Main Doctrines of the Christian Religion Attempted.'³⁹ But we find no mention of this title in the 1757 letter to the Princeton Trustees, and in its place we find the 'History of the Work of Redemption' project. How can this shift be accounted for? In the context of chapter 3, our discussion focused on how the 'History' project might have been better suited to pursue Edwards' relational/communicative argument for the necessity of special revelation. Here we consider Ava Chamberlain's suggestion that Edwards' own experience of redemptive history might have persuaded him to make this transition:

'The Miscellanies' confirm what Edwards' failure to write the 'Rational Account' and his plan to revise 'A History of the Work of Redemption' only suggest, that over time he concluded that the argument from history was more persuasive than the argument from reason...That this shift occurred after the Connecticut Valley awakening may give some indication of its cause. Having witnessed a decisive moment in salvation history, Edwards turned to history to pursue his debate with the deists.⁴⁰

To put the matter in other terms, why should Edwards bother casting about for logical proofs for the Christian faith when God has providentially supplied irrefutable proof through current events? If he wished to show that the God of the Bible and the doctrine of his religion were true, there could hardly be a better method of demonstration than the supernatural in-breaking evidenced by the revivals, as well as their precedents and parallels throughout recorded history. However, it should also be kept in mind that Edwards does not repudiate his former approach or delete his source material based upon it; beyond the shift in large-scale method, the two projects seem to have shared much in terms of goals and probably even in content.

³⁹ Edwards, 'Outline of A Rational Account' in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 396. See above, chapter 3 section VIII.

⁴⁰ Ava Chamberlain, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 34.

Edwards' appreciation for the apologetic/polemic value of history is actually to be seen in one of his earliest published works, the 1738 *Discourses on Various Important Subjects*. Looking back on the Connecticut Valley awakening of 1734-36, Edwards wrote:

The beginning of the late work of God in this place was so circumstanced, that I could not but look upon it as a remarkable testimony of God's approbation of the doctrine of *justification by faith alone*, here asserted and vindicated.... The following discourse of justification, that was preached...at two public lectures, seemed to be remarkably blessed, not only to establish the judgments of many in this truth, but to engage their hearts in a more earnest pursuit of justification, in that way that had been explained and defended; and *at that time*, while I was greatly reproached for defending this doctrine in the pulpit, and just upon my suffering a very open abuse for it, God's work wonderfully brake forth amongst us, and souls began to flock to Christ, as the Saviour in whose righteousness alone they hoped to be justified.⁴¹

The doctrine of justification by faith was the first of many orthodox teachings imperilled by Enlightenment rationalism that Edwards would defend publicly. In this case, Edwards' lectures on the subject convinced some but elicited 'great reproach' from others. His scriptural and logical discourse falling on deaf ears among this latter group, it appeared to Edwards that God himself took up the cause when he 'wonderfully brake forth amongst us' in the Connecticut Valley revival, using as his instrument the very doctrine in question.⁴² This was to Edwards' mind, a 'remarkable testimony of God's approbation' of biblical doctrine. This was all said in the context of a specific instance, but the larger principle to which Edwards seemed to be warming was that God is able to supply his own apologetic in the workings of providential history.

In the very last explicit mention we have of the 'Rational Account' project in the corpus, the 'Preface to Rational Account' found in 'Miscellany' 832, Edwards applies this principle in a negative direction:

And besides, the Scripture teaches that 'tis God's manner to bless his truth, and to cause that the pure doctrines of the gospel should be accompanied with the power of his Spirit, and with a powerful effect on the hearts and lives of men. Since this fashionable divinity has been growing and getting ground, han't vice and deadness and a decay

⁴¹ Edwards, preface to *Discourses on Various Important Subjects* in *Works in Two Volumes*, Vol. 1, p. 621; emphasis original. See also Goen, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 4*, p. 19.

⁴² See also Goen, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 4*, p. 19.

of vital Christianity kept pace with it?They see, as they imagine, the errors and impertinence of the tenets of their fathers; but han't unsuccessfulness in their ministry kept pace with their refinings? Has there ever been any instance, in any age, of any great reformation of manners wrought in any society whatever, by proceeding on the foot of those principles that are now so fashionable? Incontestable and plentiful instances can be produced of this effect of other principles.⁴³

Just as God provided a supernatural historical apologetic for orthodoxy through the spiritual vitality seen in the Revivals, so God gives a sort of negative apologetic in the withholding of such conditions where false doctrine prevails. Edwards notices that those who hold 'fashionable divinity' (rationalist theology) are rewarded with a commensurate level of 'unsuccessfulness in their ministry.' Such thoughts may have led Edwards to shift a greater part of the burden of proof in his polemic/apologetic theology towards the apparently 'incontestable' evidence provided in supernatural history.

V. The History of the Work of Redemption

With this theological and historical context in place, the fact that Edwards would eventually focus his efforts on a project such as the 'History of the Work of Redemption' becomes fairly explicable. We shall now discuss the contours of this project in terms of what Edwards himself intended for this unfinished work. For this purpose, it is preferable to exegete afresh the prospectus he detailed for the project in the letter to the Princeton Trustees rather than to draw conclusions from the 1739 sermon series of that name.⁴⁴ The 'History' was to be a

...body of divinity in an entire new method, being thrown into the form of an history, considering the affair of Christian theology, as the whole of it, in each part, stands in reference to the great work of redemption by Jesus Christ [...] particularly considering all parts of the grand scheme in their historical order.⁴⁵

Edwards considered such a method to be 'entirely new' because Edwards was proposing a radical shift in the way works of systematic theology were done. Instead of the time-tested format found in say, Turretin's *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, in which the *loci* of theology are introduced in logical order and discussed by answering

⁴³ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 832 in *Works Vol. 18*, pp. 546-547.

⁴⁴ As is frequently noted, it is important to recognise that the 'History of the Work of Redemption' project was never finished, and may not have been identical with the 1739 sermon series of that name found in anthologies.

⁴⁵ Edwards, 'Letter to the Princeton Trustees' of 19 October, 1757, in *Works Vol. 16*, pp. 727-728.

potted questions with ‘we affirm’ or ‘we deny’, Edwards planned to teach theology ‘in the form of an history.’ Edwards was at the very least proposing a new pedagogical and apologetic strategy—it would be ‘a method which appears to me the most beautiful and entertaining, wherein every divine doctrine, will appear to greatest advantage in the brightest light.’⁴⁶ In a way not unlike his modification of Puritan homiletics in a direction that better brought together a sermon’s noetic content with the affections that were appropriate to it, Edwards wanted to renovate systematic theology to make this discipline ‘beautiful and entertaining’ in better keeping with its glorious subject matter.⁴⁷

It is likely, however, that Edwards thought such a methodological shift also had deeper implications for the resulting content of theology. He says that it would be a means of ‘introducing all parts of divinity in that order which is *most scriptural and most natural* [...] showing the admirable contexture and *harmony* of the whole.’⁴⁸ Since ‘harmony’—harmony between the testaments, harmony between theology and reason, harmony between history and Scripture—was the very thing Edwards wished to demonstrate in all his work,⁴⁹ it would seem that Edwards considered the historical presentation of theology to be significant for its content, not to mention that it was ‘most scriptural.’ More on harmony momentarily, but we should note in passing that Edwards’ proposal sounds very much like the Biblical Theology popularised by Vos in the 20th century. In a 1994 article, Stephen M. Clark makes this very point of how Edwards long anticipates Vos: ‘His 1739 History of the Work of Redemption sermons articulate a historical principle of treatment that appears fifty years before Johann Philip Gabler, and a full two centuries before Geerhardus Vos’ classical Reformed treatment.’⁵⁰

Another aspect of Edwards’ project that is highly relevant here is the nature of the material that was to be taken into account. Progressive revelation would be

...brought forth to view, in the course of divine dispensations, or the wonderful series of successive acts and events; beginning from

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* For Edwards, who thought that beauty was fundamentally reflective of the Trinity, a valuation of ‘most beautiful’ represented something stronger than a mere preference.

⁴⁷ See Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 539 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 86.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, emphasis mine.

⁴⁹ At least this is my contention; see below, Chap. 6. See also E. Brooks Holifield, ‘Edwards as Theologian’ in Stephen J. Stein, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 145-146; 154.

⁵⁰ Stephen M. Clark, ‘Jonathan Edwards: The History of the Work of Redemption,’ *Westminster Theological Journal* 56, no. 1 (1994), p. 56.

eternity and descending from thence to the great work and successive dispensations of the infinitely wise God in time, considering the chief events coming to pass in the church of God, and revolutions in the world of mankind, affecting the state of the church and the affair of redemption, which we have an account of in history and prophecy; [...] This history will be carried on with regard to all three worlds, heaven, earth, and hell: considering the connected, successive events and alterations, in each so far as the Scriptures give any light...⁵¹

Edwards' narrative would include 'revolutions in the world of mankind' no less than significant events in ecclesiastical history, and would use as its sources accounts in both 'history and prophecy.' This suggests a seamless integration of post-biblical historical records with the biblical account, though still controlled by the contents of Scripture: 'so far as the Scriptures give any light.' The critical phrase 'give any light' perhaps needs some clarification provided by the context of the preceding section of the letter, where he explains that his method was '...to improve every important hint; pursuing the clue to my utmost, when any thing in reading, meditation, or conversation, has been suggested to my mind, that seemed to promise light in any weighty point...'.⁵² With this context suggesting Edwards' habitual extrapolation in mind, it seems that he wanted to include in his account not only the contents of Scripture but also the portions of post-biblical history that were predicted or explained by them. This is of course precisely what we find even in the 1739 sermon series *A History of the Work of Redemption* that would provide the core of Edwards' later project.⁵³

Yet again, it is important to see that such integration of historical material did not imply that Edwards considered church history to be fully on a par with Scripture. Scripture was necessary and sufficient, whereas history was not:

...the Scriptures should sufficiently explain themselves; so that we should have no need of joining unto them the writings of the fathers or church historians, and being acquainted with them, in order to our being directed and determined in any important matter...⁵⁴

Thanks to the sufficiency of Scripture, we simply do not need the 'fathers or church historians' to determine 'any important matter' such as church doctrine. However, Edwards' purpose for using church history in the 'History' project was not to acquire

⁵¹ Edwards, 'Letter to the Princeton Trustees' in *Works Vol. 16*, p. 728.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 727.

⁵³ See Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption* in *Works Vol. 9*, p. 111-528.

⁵⁴ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 535 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 79.

new doctrine but to enhance what was already believed by adding to it a record of divine affirmation and colourful reiteration in history.

Returning now to Edwards' statement that he planned to show '...the admirable contexture and *harmony* of the whole,' it is worth repeating that the demonstration of harmony was for Edwards the key to the entire apologetic and polemic enterprise. This subject is treated at length above, but notice that Edwards' alternate title for the 'Rational Account' apologetic project—of which the 'History' project was far more a development rather than a discontinuation—was in fact 'The Perfect *Harmony* between the Doctrines of the Christian Religion and Human Reason Manifested.'⁵⁵ Moreover, the apologetic/polemic enterprise was itself an engine for the progression of redemptive history. Edwards believed that one day God was going to accomplish his own 'Enlightenment' '...when he will himself by his own immediate influence enlighten men's minds; [...] when human learning shall be subservient to understanding the Scriptures and a clear explaining and glorious defending the doctrines of Christianity.'⁵⁶ Until then, however, ministers like Edwards were to set forth to unbelievers the doctrines of Christianity in as clear and convincing a manner as possible to accomplish similar effects, though on a smaller scale.⁵⁷

Harmony was, if you like, God's calling card, examples of which were to be found throughout a seemingly bewildering phenomenological reality. Edwards thus thought that, properly narrated and interpreted, history brought us face to face with the harmonious actions of an intelligent agent directing the seemingly disparate parts of history. Of course the Deists and other rationalists did not share this view. Just as they looked at the Bible and saw sixty-six books written by dozens of human authors each expressing varying theological viewpoints, so they saw in history millions of human actors all advancing their own individual or cultural causes in the absence of transcendent direction. Moreover, they saw orthodox theology as wildly out of step with the pronouncements of human reason, the 'candle of the Lord.'⁵⁸ Edwards, enlightened by a regenerate understanding of God's transcendent ways, looked at all these things and saw perfect harmony. Edwards' ambitious goal in the 'History' was

⁵⁵ Chamberlain, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 25; emphasis mine.

⁵⁶ Edwards 'Sermon 24' of *History of the Work of Redemption* in *Works Vol. 9*. See also 'Exposition of the Apocalypse' in *Works Vol. 5*, p. 118.

⁵⁷ See Edwards, 'Miscellany' 539 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 86; see also below, Chapter 6.

⁵⁸ Locke, *Essay*, IV.3.20.

thus to get his readers to recognise that harmony, enabling them to realise their own purpose in God's own project of self-communication.

We have seen that Edwards states explicitly and publicly his opinion that the Awakening of the 1730's was God's vindication of orthodox doctrine. And it is well known that the bulk of Edwards' early work was taken up with the defence of the Awakenings as the supernatural work of God.⁵⁹ Was, then, the 'History' project basically a further attempt to vindicate the pro-Revival perspective? Avihu Zakai adopts this position, pointing out that Edwards joins a long line of other theologians-turned historians who sought to justify the present situation of the church via the construction of a historical account.

Attempting to provide historical justification for the revival, he refashioned himself more and more as an historian, one who constantly sought to unveil the sacred historical background for this New England movement.... In consciously assuming the task of siting the revival within ecclesiastical history, Edwards resembled other figures in the history of the church who wrote their narratives in response to some decisive historical changes in order to explain the changing circumstances of the Christian church in the world. [cites Eusebius, Augustine and Foxe]⁶⁰

Zakai's comparisons with figures such as Augustine are apt, reminding us that Edwards' theological and apologetic use of history has significant precedent. And it seems likely that the 'History' project was at least partially occasioned by the recent experience of exceptional events that called for a defence. In Edwards' view, God was revealing himself in the Awakenings even if the anti-revival 'Old Lights' refused to see it. Just as most of this group resisted God's Word as it taught justification by faith, they were now resisting his works that confirmed the same. Edwards therefore needed to show that periodic revivals were God's method of advancing his kingdom in Scripture and throughout history. Yet in terms of Edwards' larger goals it would perhaps be a mistake to focus too much on this issue of simply vindicating the revivals, since it is clear that the 'History' sought to defend the entirety of orthodox Christian doctrine.

⁵⁹ See the contents of *Works Vol. 4*.

⁶⁰ Zakai, *Reenchantment*, p. 279.

VI. Current Events and The Christian History Periodicals

The 'History of the Work of Redemption' project is one of the best-known aspects of Edwards' work. Far less known, but perhaps equally indicative of his attitude towards God's works in providence as a revelatory medium was Edwards' role in the short-lived American periodical called *The Christian History* and its Scottish counterpart *The Christian Monthly History*. To get there, we first consider the remarkable attitude towards current events Edwards presents in the 'Personal Narrative':

If I heard the least hint of anything that happened in any part of the world, that appeared to me, in some respect or other, to have a favorable aspect on the interest of Christ's kingdom, my soul eagerly caught at it; and it would much animate and refresh me. I used to be earnest to read public news-letters, mainly for that end; to see if I could not find some news favorable to the interests of religion in the world.⁶¹

What is interesting about this quote is the apparent symmetry between Edwards' portrayal of the role played by current events and similar portrayals regarding Scripture and nature he expresses elsewhere in the 'Personal Narrative.' In all three cases, his experience of supernatural regeneration allows him to receive God's several media of revelation with great zeal and joy. To hear Edwards describe it, he would seem to have derived nearly as much soul-ravishing pleasure from reading newspapers as from the Bible. But these parallel affective experiences from diverse media of divine communication are consistent with Edwards' reality-sized theology of revelation.

Edwards naturally did not want to see God's revelation in history go to waste by distortion or lack of notice, and particularly not in times of revival where the sheer density and pace of events made conventional secular outlets unsuitable. Thus, the very last measure he proposed in the 1742 *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival* to promote God's work was to call for a periodical dedicated to revival news:

One thing more I would mention, which if God should still carry on this work, would tend much to promote it, and that is that an history should be published once a month, or once a fort-night, of the progress of it, by one of the ministers of Boston, who are near the press and are most conveniently situated to receive accounts from all parts. It has been found by experience that the tidings of remarkable effects of the

⁶¹ Edwards, 'Personal Narrative' in *Works Vol. 16*, p. 797.

power and grace of God in any place, tend greatly to awaken and engage the minds of persons in other places. 'Tis great pity therefore, but that some means should be used for the most speedy, most extensive and certain giving information of such things, and that the country ben't left only to the slow, partial and doubtful information and false representations of common report.⁶²

Notice the activist tone seen in this proposal, as with the numerous others that preceded it: the history newsletter would 'tend very much to promote' the ongoing revival. Edwards provides as support for his case the observation that 'the tidings of remarkable effects of the power and grace of God in any place, tend greatly to awaken and engage the minds of persons in other places,' comporting with his remarks in the 'Personal Narrative' and with his theology generally.

Edwards states in a letter to a Scottish minister of May 1743 that the proposed project was being undertaken by Thomas Prince, Jr. in Boston.⁶³ Prince indeed began the weekly publication of *The Christian History* in March 1743, and Robe himself undertook the Scottish equivalent.⁶⁴ Goen describes the brief course of these publications in a footnote:

The periodical [*The Christian History*] published two annual volumes before expiring in 1744. A Scottish counterpart, *The Christian Monthly History*, was issued at Edinburgh under the editorship of James Robe, friend and correspondent of [Edwards]; appearing irregularly in sixteen numbers between November 1743 and January 1746, it printed many items of American intelligence.⁶⁵

The periodicals dried upon along with the Great Awakening they chronicled. What does this little episode tell us about Edwards? Perhaps it shows how seriously he took the mandate for intelligent creatures to observe, understand and re-emanate God's self-communication in time. As we shall soon see, Edwards had been proving in his private notebooks that the work of redemption is by far the greatest of God's works, and that even the glorified saints in heaven will gain in their knowledge and love of God by carefully watching the events of redemptive history on earth. It makes sense that he would want to promulgate among the earthly saints such a significant episode of this great work through the use of these short-lived news periodicals.

⁶² Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival*, in *Works Vol. 4*, p. 529.

⁶³ Edwards, 'Letter to the Rev. James Robe' in *Works Vol. 4*, p. 538.

⁶⁴ Goen, 'Editor's Introduction' to *Works Vol. 4*, p. 59.

⁶⁵ Goen, *Works Vol. 4*, pp. 78-79 note 7.

VII. The Redemptive-Historical Beatific Vision

Many of Edwards' distinctive contributions as a theologian can be identified simply by observing the recurrent themes we find in the 'Miscellanies.' Certain problems or possibilities interested him more than others, and would thus become the subject of multiple revisions in his attempts to come to the truth of the matter and to state the resulting doctrine most aptly. One such recurring theme was Edwards' preoccupation with an innovative doctrine we might call the redemptive-historical beatific vision. Traditionally, the beatific vision describes the blessed state of the saints in heaven as those who are in some manner enabled to see God. Edwards affirms this basic doctrine. But he also expends a great amount of effort in the 'Miscellanies' to prove something rather unexpected: in addition to their enjoyment of the immediate divine presence, one of the great privileges and joyful occupations of the saints in heaven will be to witness the progress of redemptive history on earth. This thesis, one that appears to have no clear precedent among Edwards' inheritance, is somewhat underrepresented in the secondary literature.⁶⁶ More importantly for our purpose here, an understanding of the redemptive-historical beatific vision will serve to underscore the enormous place history had in Edwards' theology of revelation and his overall project.

The first record we have of Edwards' thoughts on this subject comes in 'Miscellany' 105, written in early 1724:⁶⁷ 'That the glorified spirits shall grow in holiness and happiness to eternity, I argue from this foundation, that their number of ideas shall increase to eternity.'⁶⁸ This doctrine of the progressive nature of heavenly joy is consonant with the theological underpinnings of Edwards' doctrine of revelation discussed above.⁶⁹ To review, Edwards thought that intelligent creatures were created to know God, love the God they knew (with this love being the essence of holiness) and enjoy the God they loved (the foundation of their happiness). It seemed intuitively clear to Edwards that 'glorified spirits' would endlessly have new input into this process in the form of new ideas. Edwards does not need to say 'ideas *about God*' here because his all-encompassing doctrine of revelation makes this unnecessary: any real information is ultimately valuable for, and is in fact intended

⁶⁶ The topic was taken up by Paul Ramsey in Appendix II to *Works Vol. 8* written in 1989, but it does not seem to have figured since.

⁶⁷ Schaefer, 'Editor's Introduction' in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 94.

⁶⁸ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 105 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 275.

⁶⁹ See above, chapter 1.

expressly for, knowing God. Thus the saints and angels would forever know him more, love him more and enjoy him more in an eternally upwards spiral. Edwards does not at this point seem to be propelled to this conclusion by any explicit exegetical data, but rather out of systematic if not philosophical considerations.⁷⁰

Edwards would soon go on to find scriptural support for his concept, however, as shown in ‘Miscellany’ 372:

It seems to be quite a wrong notion of the happiness of heaven, that it is in that manner unchangeable, that it admits not of new joys upon new occasions. The Scripture tells us that there is joy in heaven and amongst [the angels] upon the conversion of one sinner; and why not among the saints? Their joy is continually increased, as they see the purposes of God’s grace unfolded in his wondrous providences towards his church.... I believe also that it greatly contributed to the happiness of the saints in heaven, to see the success of the gospel after Christ’s ascension, and its conquering the Roman empire; and that they greatly rejoiced at the reformation from popery, and will exceedingly rejoice at the fall of Antichrist and the conversion of the world to Christianity (these things seem clear to me by many passages in the Revelation); and that their joy is increasing and will be increasing, as God gradually in his providence unveils his glory till the last day.⁷¹

Edwards begins by informing us of the polemic agenda lying behind his interest in the topic: he is convinced that the traditional understanding of the heavenly state as a static condition is wrongheaded and inadequate. He then moves quickly to scriptural exegesis in support of his position, most importantly Luke 15:7’s teaching that human repentance on earth brings joy in heaven. Edwards then concludes with a more general reference to the Book of Revelation whereby such ‘things seem clear to me.’ Edwards also makes a fairly seamless transition from biblical material to examples taken from history, such as the conversion of the Roman state to Christianity and the Reformation.

The basic parameters of Edwards’ theory—that the heavenly beatific state is progressive and that the revelation funding this progression comes at least partially from witnessing redemptive history—are now in place. But one loose end remains. Edwards has not yet answered the fundamental objection of why anything would *need* to be added to the traditional beatific vision, or why would anyone *want* to look at earthly events if they could see God directly. This question is answered in the

⁷⁰ Edwards later appended to ‘Miscellany’ 105 a reference to his notes on Psalm 89:1-2.

⁷¹ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 372 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 444-445.

mature statement of the doctrine completed many years later in ‘Miscellany’ 777, an essay that is no doubt one of the most significant sources for Edwards’ doctrine of revelation generally. This lengthy entry begins thus:

HAPPINESS OF HEAVEN IS PROGRESSIVE, and has various periods in which it has a new and glorious advancement, and consists very much in BEHOLDING the manifestations that God makes of himself in the WORK OF REDEMPTION. There can be no view or knowledge that one spiritual being can have of another, but it must be either immediate and intuitive, or mediate, or [by] some manifestations or signs.⁷²

The points that Edwards wants to prove are two. The happiness of heaven is progressive rather than static, and it consists ‘very much’ in beholding the work of redemption. Immediately following this thesis statement, Edwards begins to explain his response to the question of why the beatific vision cannot consist simply of beholding God directly: God cannot simply be gazed upon in this way because he is a spiritual being, and thus requires a mediated sighting even by other spiritual beings.

From there, Edwards might have moved straight on to his specific point about the revelatory role of redemptive history. But in this theologically rich statement, Edwards continues to probe the implications of God’s invisibility in order to introduce the unique situation of the Son of God: ‘...there is no creature can thus have an immediate sight of God, but only Jesus Christ, who is in the bosom of God.’⁷³ Here at what would seem to be the core of Edwards’ doctrine of revelation is a restatement of the Reformed orthodox view of Christ as *the* medium of revelation. Edwards explains that ‘Jesus Christ, who alone sees immediately, [is] the grand medium of the knowledge of all others; they know no otherwise than by the exhibitions held forth in and by him, as the Scripture is express.’⁷⁴

With this crucial element established, Edwards puts all the pieces together to make a full statement on one of his most characteristic doctrines:

And they see and know God in heaven by his Word or speech, for there the saints are with God, and converse with God, and God converses with them by voluntary manifestations and significations of his mind, either by external signs or by impulses of his Spirit; and this also is by Christ. They converse with God by conversing with Christ, who speaketh the words of God... ’Tis God’s pleasure that Christ

⁷² Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 777 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 427.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 428.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*.

should be the light, the Sun of heaven, by which God should be seen and known there, for it pleases the Father that in him all fullness should dwell. And again they see and know God in heaven by his works, which are the effects of the glorious perfections there are in him; and this also is in Christ, for all the works of God are wrought in him by whom all things are made... *And especially do they see his glory as it is manifested in the work of redemption...*⁷⁵

Certainly the saints do see God in heaven, because they see Jesus Christ. And they ‘converse with God’ by conversing with Christ. But they also know God by his glorious works, which indeed are done by God through the agency of Christ. And the greatest of these works is the work of redemption, wherein by viewing the ongoing events on earth the saints continually learn more of God’s glory.

Edwards sometimes theorised in the ‘Miscellanies’ or other notebooks on speculative topics that never made an appearance in his sermons. Edwards was, after all, a pastor, and he did not consider each and every such item important or certain enough to preach on. But he apparently felt free enough to preach on his doctrine of the redemptive-historical beatific vision. This is seen in a sermon preached for the funeral of his friend David Brainerd, who had spent his final days in the Edwards’ home. Here we find Edwards pushing the limits of human language to convey the blessedness of heaven, where the great reward will be our intimate conversation with Christ. And one of the main topics of this conversation will be, astonishingly, *the state of affairs on earth*.

That part of the family that is in heaven, are surely not unacquainted with the affairs of that part of the same family that is on earth. They that are with the king, and are next to him, the royal family, that dwell in his palace, are not kept in ignorance of the affairs of his kingdom. [...] And that which gives them much greater advantage for such an acquaintance, than the things already mentioned, in their being constantly in the immediate presence of Christ, and in the enjoyment of the most perfect intercourse with him, who is the King who manages all these affairs, and has an absolutely perfect knowledge of them.⁷⁶

Edwards is not beyond proving his case to his auditors, but no more so than what he would customarily do as a homiletic strategy for any aspect of the historic Reformed faith. It would thus appear that by the time of Brainerd’s death, Edwards had satisfied himself that his understanding of the beatific vision was essentially beyond

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 429-430; emphasis mine.

⁷⁶ Edwards, ‘True Saints are Present with the Lord’ in *Works Vol. 25*, p. 237.

doubt. The sermon also develops a contextually important nuance—the title being ‘True Saints are Present with the Lord’—regarding Christ’s central role in even the media of the redemptive-historical beatific vision. It is not that saints merely witness the progress of the work of redemption on their own recognisance, which could presumably be done on earth. The great advantage of the saints in heaven is their ‘enjoyment of the most perfect intercourse with him, who is the King who manages all these affairs, and has an absolutely perfect knowledge of them.’ In other words, Christ personally narrates and interprets the course of events on earth for the benefit of the saints in heaven so they might enter into a perfect understanding of their revelatory, doxological content. Such a statement might also describe Edwards’ own theological project—more on this in the concluding chapter.

VIII. Zakai on ‘Miscellany’ 777

Considering the prominence history held in Jonathan Edwards’ thought, Avihu Zakai’s recent book-length study devoted to the subject, *Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment*, is a welcome contribution to the literature.⁷⁷ Zakai, however, takes a debateable position on a subject that is important for our study of Edwards’ theology of revelation. The discussion begins with a scholarly dispute over interpretation, considers an apparent inconsistency in Edwards and finally provides an entrée into Edwards’ understanding on the nature of revelation in time.

The dispute concerns the relative place Edwards assigns to basic categories of revelation. The question is, did Edwards’ enthusiasm for the possibilities of non-scriptural revelation outstrip his allegiance to traditional Calvinist assumptions about the supremacy of Scripture, as Zakai implies?⁷⁸ The issue was raised by Michael J. McClymond in a formidable *Journal of Religion* review, where he writes ‘...Zakai’s claim that Edwards showed ‘an exaltation of nature to a level of authority co-equal with revelation’...overlooks Edwards’s criticisms of the Deists and their reliance on natural theology.’⁷⁹ Indeed, we devote an entire chapter to Edwards’ numerous arguments proving the futility of natural theology and pointing unambiguously to the

⁷⁷ Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of History: The Reenchantment of the World in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). This book has already been referred to above.

⁷⁸ Zakai, *Reenchantment*, p. 74.

⁷⁹ Michael J. McClymond, ‘Review of Avihu Zakai, *Jonathan Edwards’s Philosophy of History*,’ *The Journal of Religion* 85, no. 1 (2005), p. 122.

necessity of special revelation.⁸⁰ How, then, could Zakai think that Edwards posited ‘an exaltation of nature to a level of authority co-equal with revelation’? Moreover, he was not alone in so thinking; although McClymond does not indicate this, Zakai was in fact quoting the words of Harvard historian and inaugural General Editor of Yale’s *Works of Jonathan Edwards* project, Perry Miller.⁸¹ Furthermore, both the original statement in Miller and Zakai’s approving quotation are linked to assertions by their respective authors that Edwards broke with Calvin on the value of natural revelation.⁸² If these scholars are not both flatly wrong, it would seem that either there is some complexity in the issue that could so lead them astray or else there is some inconsistency in Edwards. In either case, the issue is worth some further investigation.

When we examine Zakai’s relevant reference to the primary material, it seems at first glance that not only does he have support for Miller’s statement but actually has license to say even more than he does. This apparent warrant comes from the aforementioned ‘Miscellany’ 777, which Zakai quotes at length just before making his controversial statement:

So far as they see God and know him in his works (which is *the principal way in which God manifests himself, and to which the manifestation of himself in his Word is subordinate*: [Zakai begins his quote here] the manifestations God makes of himself in his works are the principal manifestations of his perfections, and the declarations and teaching of his Word are to lead to those....⁸³

Recall that Zakai incurred the wrath of McClymond by saying only that Edwards assigns nature/history a ‘co-equal’ status with Scripture. Edwards himself, it seems, does not shrink from saying that ‘the manifestation of himself in his Word is *subordinate*’ to that in his ‘works’ (meaning nature and—especially—redemptive history.) This portion of ‘Miscellany’ 777 has, either understandably or oddly depending on one’s perspective, rarely seen the light of day in the secondary literature. The leading clause containing the ‘subordinate’ dynamite is in fact elided

⁸⁰ See above, chapter 3.

⁸¹ Zakai, *Reenchantment*, p. 74; quoting Perry Miller, ed., *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), p. 28.

⁸² See Zakai, *Reenchantment* pp. 72-74.

⁸³ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 777 in *Works Vol. 18* p. 430; emphasis mine. Although Zakai also cites the *Works* edition, his ‘&’ symbol-laden quotation in *Reenchantment*, p. 73 seems to be from the manuscript or a transcription.

from Zakai's own quotation, no doubt saying too much even for a purpose he judged to be sufficiently controversial to oblige an appeal to Miller's authority.⁸⁴

The possibility of inconsistency in Edwards now becomes problematically real, for McClymond is surely right to point to Edwards' strident arguments for the necessity of special revelation in his anti-deist polemic documented above.⁸⁵ We need turn only to such statements as 'Miscellany' 350 to see that Edwards unambiguously denies the possibility of natural theology: 'If there never had been any revelation, I believe the world would be full of endless dispute about the very being of a God, whether the world was from eternity or not, and whether the form and order of the world don't result from the mere nature of matter...'.⁸⁶ Yet it hardly seems likely that the unremittingly logical author of *Freedom of the Will* could allow himself to fall into such a blatant inconsistency on such an important issue.

The resolution to this problem comes at least partially when attention is paid to the tri-world (consisting of heaven, this world, and hell; in past, present and future time) contexts that Edwards flits between in his notebook entries. We notice that 'Miscellany' 777 is entitled 'HAPPINESS OF HEAVEN IS PROGRESSIVE' and that Edwards is speaking in the third person about the condition of *perfected saints in heaven*, not on earth. Edwards' statements here and in similar places are simply not directly relevant to the human situation in this world, where our fallen condition absolutely necessitates a special revelation. Zakai seems not to have given sufficient attention and/or weight to the fact that Edwards was, as so often, speculating about another world.

The fuller resolution of this issue turns on what Edwards meant when he spoke of God's works being 'principal' and his Word 'subordinate'. It may be that in failing to reconcile or even take into account the thorny aspects of this remarkable 'Miscellany,' Zakai overlooked something truly interesting and significant in Edwards' doctrine of revelation. Here is the quotation again, down to the end of the section:

So far as they see God and know him in his works (which is the principal way in which God manifests himself, and to which the manifestation of himself in his Word is subordinate: the manifestations God makes of himself in his works are the principal

⁸⁴ Zakai, *Reenchantment*, p. 73.

⁸⁵ See above, chapter 3.

⁸⁶ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 350 in *Works Vol. 13* pp. 421-422.

manifestations of his perfections, and the declarations and teaching of his Word are to lead to those;...) they see and know [him] as he manifests himself in the work of redemption, which [is] the greatest and most glorious of all God's works, the work of works to which all God's works are reduced. And [this] is the end, and as it were the sum of all God's works, to the purposes and ends of which work heaven and all its angels were created; and which is a work that the redeemed saints in heaven are concerned [with] far above all other works of God, in which the glory of the divine perfections, and especially the glory of his love, appears as much more brightly than in any other work, as the light of the sun is above that of the stars, and of which work all their glory and blessedness in heaven is a fruit and a part. And this work by way of eminency is THE WORK of Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible [God], by whom alone God is seen and known by the saints.⁸⁷

Edwards' comparison between God's Word and his works has nothing whatever to do with the relative *authority* of natural and special revelation, which is what Miller and Zakai seem to think. The purpose of this part of 'Miscellany' 777 is to provide the foundation for Edwards' doctrine of the redemptive-historical beatific vision, and the issue is about *logical priority*. Considered absolutely, God's Word is indeed 'subordinate' to his works, but not because it is somehow of less authority or otherwise deficient. It is simply because God's Word is necessarily secondary to the works it describes to us, logically speaking. Without God's works there would be nothing for the Word to say. To return again to the metaphor of the theatre, the inspired programme does not exist in isolation from the play it describes. Edwards' point is simply to say that God certainly wants his saints to *see the play itself*, which is the radix of his revelation to them.

Notice also that this logical priority does not, at least to Edwards' mind, end up disparaging the second person of the Trinity. As the image of the Father he is the Word of God; but no less is the great work of redemption 'THE WORK of Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible [God].' All of God's works and all of God's words come through him. It is all by Christ, 'by whom alone God is seen and known by the saints,' whatever side of the coin we chose to look at. How far Edwards' approach holds up in terms of biblical exegesis is another matter, but it seems at least plausible.

⁸⁷ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 777 in *Works Vol. 18*, pp. 430-431.

VIII. Conclusion

Edwards was both an historian and a theologian of history. His use of history was not that of his godless Enlightenment contemporaries venerating human machinations, but that of a preacher glorifying God as the true protagonist of history. Through the interpretive guide of Scripture, history became for him a hugely important media of divine revelation. In both the construction of his theology and in the production of his corpus, he took God's purposes in providence with the utmost seriousness. In his earnest speculations about heaven, he looked forward to hearing Christ's perfect explanation of the oft-confusing course of events on earth. In his works such as the *History of the Work of Redemption*, he sought to provide his own generation with as best an approximation as he could muster. He did so not only to help people appreciate the God who carried out his glorious purposes in history, but also to enable them to fall in actively with those purposes.

In the course of this chapter, the story of Edwards' larger project has been building. It is to a fuller discussion of this subject that we now turn in the final chapter.

Chapter 6

Edwards' Project of Interpreting the Harmony of Reality

‘Sensible things, by virtue of the harmony and proportion that is seen in them, carry the appearance of perceiving and willing being.’—Jonathan Edwards, ‘The Mind’¹

1. Introduction

In this concluding chapter, we shall propose a theory that Edwards’ great project was to interpret all reality as the harmonious revelation of the triune God, so that his auditors and readers might better fulfil their purpose to re-emanate this revelation. We believe that this is a plausible and useful way to understand Edwards’ entire corpus. Let us first summarise the ground that has been covered in the preceding chapters.

Our study of Edwards’ doctrine of revelation began by attending to some relevant core issues in his theology, in which we saw how his doctrines of God and of creation each lay heavy stress on the concept of ‘communicativeness’. God is a ‘communicative Being,’ and his communicativeness provided the answer to one of the most important and original questions, if not *the* question, of Edwards’ theological career: why did God create the universe? God created in order to *communicate* himself to angels and men, so they would know God, love him and partake of his joy. Divine communication in this comprehensive sense lies therefore at the heart of Edwards’ distinctive theology, and it might with some justification be called a theology of revelation.²

After establishing the importance of communicativeness for Edwards’ doctrine of revelation, we then turned to consider the locus as it was worked out in each of the three media of God’s self-communication: nature, Scripture and history. Here the key concept was ‘harmony’, the golden thread running through Edwards’

¹ ‘The Mind’ entry 63 in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 382.

² It is possible to understand Edwards in a way that would seem that he was advocating an overly intellectualist vision, in which faithful living is neglected in favour of passive contemplation. However, as Edwards shows in *The Nature of True Virtue*, the love that originates in God and which is communicated to men will inevitably lead Christians to all manner of virtuous activity.

multifarious observations on the media of revelation. In God's great project, which might be likened to the theatre, nature is the set that endlessly inspires praise for its infinite designer, Scripture is the inspired programme that alone guides the audience into understanding what they see and hear, and history is the divinely-directed drama centred around Christ's redemption of humanity. At the cognitive level—and in polar opposition to Enlightenment proclivities—these media were in perfect agreement or harmony with one another. At the aesthetic level, Edwards believed that harmony was itself the trinitarian hallmark that necessarily accompanied all elements of God's communicative project and which endowed them with a meaning larger than that of their individual notional content. The apprehension of this harmony required the supernaturally given 'new sense', but it was enabled by the divinely ordained means of human teaching.³ If one were enabled to see the harmony, one would be convinced; and if one were convinced, one would be enabled to see the harmony.

What remains is to say how these interrelated concepts—God's communicative project and the harmony that marks it—can give us some purchase on Edwards' larger project. We shall argue here that *Edwards' project was to interpret all reality as the harmonious revelation of the Triune God, so that people might better fulfil their purpose to apprehend and re-emanate this revelation*. God created the universe in order to communicate himself—noetically, affectionally and beatifically, through the harmonious media of nature, history and special revelation—to angels and men, whose purpose it was to receive and joyfully to re-emanate this communication. Edwards also believed that God employs human ministers as his helpers in this redemptive work, who assist people in better understanding and appropriating revelation. Moreover, at a time when the Deists were asserting the disharmony of nature with Scripture, history with Scripture, and Scripture with itself, Edwards' life work was to argue the very opposite: nature, history and Scripture are all in perfect, though highly complex, harmony with themselves and one another, and that this harmony demonstrates the underlying reality of the beautiful Triune mind.

This proposal amounts to a fairly ambitious recasting of Edwards' work, and it calls for a commensurate level of demonstration. We shall therefore discuss in this concluding chapter three categories of material that argue for this perspective: the thrust of Edwards' distinctive theology, the stated goals of his projected great works

³ See Edwards, 'Miscellany' 123 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 287.

and what Edwards says about himself and his ministerial vocation. The last category requires the introduction of some new material in relation to Edwards' doctrine of the ministry, but the other evidence has already appeared in some form above and is merely recounted here. This presentation is intended to establish the plausibility and potential usefulness of our thesis as a means of understanding Edwards' project, not, however, to insist that it is true to the exclusion of all other possibilities. We will instead suggest that this theory may offer a new layer of explanatory power to the set of heuristic lenses already available to Edwards' readers.⁴

II. Edwards' Theology

We begin with three aspects of Edwards' distinctive theology. We established in the first chapter how Edwards believed all created reality was the result of God's self-communicative activity, and this need not be rehearsed here in any detail. The relevant point is simply to say that Edwards thought God had a 'project' in creation and redemption: to communicate himself to intelligent beings noetically, affectionally and beatifically. Man's corresponding 'project' was to re-emanate this Trinitarian communication actively and intelligently. We might therefore expect that the goals of Edwards' own project would reflect this fundamental teleology; and our theory suggests that they are indeed a mirror image.

The second item is Edwards' conviction that the apprehension of harmony was the grand method of God's self-communication. The Triune God is the '... supreme harmony of all;' so when God communicates himself, he necessarily communicates harmony.⁵ This harmony is present throughout all aspects of reality, and intelligent beings were created with the ability of perceiving and taking delight in it.⁶ Furthermore, the perception of harmony leads one to know the intelligent being that lies behind it: 'Sensible things, by virtue of the harmony and proportion that is seen in them, carry the appearance of perceiving and willing being.'⁷ All of the media of revelation carry this divine stamp of harmony pointing toward their author, as in the example of Scripture:

...there is that wondrous universal harmony and consent and concurrence... that the evidence is the same that the Scriptures are the

⁴ A sampling of these is found below, section V.

⁵ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 182 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 329.

⁶ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 108 in *Works Vol. 13*, pp. 278-279.

⁷ Edwards, 'The Mind' entry 63 in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 382.

word and work of a divine mind, to one that is thoroughly acquainted with them, as 'tis that the words and actions of an understanding man are from a rational mind, to one that has of a long time been his familiar acquaintance.⁸

When one sees the harmony manifested in God's Word and works, one is made aware of its author and vice versa. This theme is in evidence throughout Edwards' corpus. Given the pervasiveness of this concept in his theology, it would seem requisite that harmony would need somehow to be represented in a theory explaining Edwards' project.

The third aspect of Edwards' theology—one perhaps less basic but one that nonetheless speaks volumes to the issue at hand—is his vision of Christ continuing a prophetic role in heaven by interpreting redemptive history for the benefit of the saints. This interesting notion was introduced in the previous chapter in the context of the redemptive-historical beatific vision.⁹ We saw how Edwards preached that the saints are better off in heaven, not simply because they have a better vantage point for witnessing the ongoing affairs of God's great work of redemption, but because Christ, who 'has an absolutely perfect knowledge' of these events, is there to *explain* it all to them.¹⁰ This fascinating twist to the usual handling of Christ's prophetic role is indicative of the stress Edwards put on the need for *interpretation* of the revelatory content always available in reality around us. Given such an understanding, it makes perfect sense that Edwards' project would model Christ's own ongoing ministry of interpreting reality for the benefit of the saints.

III. The Great Works

The next category of evidence we wish to present in support of our theory concerns the nature of the planned 'great works'. Edwards proposed a total of three major projects in his lifetime: the 'Rational Account,' 'The History of the Work of Redemption' and 'The Harmony of the Old and New Testament.' Previous treatments of these projects in the secondary literature have tended largely to ignore the 'Harmony of the Old and New Testament' while emphasising the radical break of the 'History of the Work of Redemption' project with the earlier 'Rational Account'

⁸ Edwards, 'Miscellany' 333 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 410.

⁹ See above, chapter 5 section VII.

¹⁰ Edwards, 'True Saints are Present with the Lord' in *Works Vol. 25*, p. 237.

project.¹¹ It is true that there was a very significant discontinuity between the two main projects in terms of approach, and this point was indeed maintained in this study.¹² However, let us now ask a different question in relation to these projects: what might they have in common? The answer, when we look at Edwards' own titles and descriptions for these projects, is rather simple: they all seek to demonstrate the harmony of the media of revelation. The reason *why* they exhibit this common purpose is, we suggest, because the demonstration of harmony was indeed the grand method of Edwards' overall project.

Edwards' brief outline for his early major project bears the title 'A Rational Account of the Main Doctrines of the Christian Religion Attempted.'¹³ The draft preface of this outline gives us a sense of Edwards' goals for the work: 'To shew how all arts and sciences, the more they are perfected, the more they issue in divinity, and coincide with it, and appear to be as parts of it.'¹⁴ It seems clear that Edwards hoped to demonstrate the harmony of natural revelation with revealed religion. This interpretation is confirmed by the alternative title for this project that appears in Edwards' 'Catalogue': 'A Rational Account of Christianity, or, The Perfect *Harmony* between the Doctrines of the Christian Religion and Human Reason Manifested.'¹⁵ Moreover, some of the proposed items that were likely intended for inclusion in the project bear out the title's harmonising intent: 'To shew how all nature consists in things being precisely according to strict rules of justice and *harmony*,'¹⁶ and 'Remember to place all about motion under the head of the manner or *harmony* of existence.'¹⁷ Edwards' first unfinished great work was thus intended to demonstrate the harmony between nature—a category that included human reason as well as science—and special revelation.

¹¹ A notable exception to this trend would be Kenneth P. Minkema, 'The Other Unfinished "Great Work": Jonathan Edwards, Messianic Prophecy, and "The Harmony of the Old and New Testament",' in Stephen J. Stein, ed., *Jonathan Edwards's Writings: Text, Context, Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 52-65.

¹² See above, chapter 3 section VIII and chapter 5 section IV.

¹³ Edwards, 'Outline of a Rational Account' in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 396.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 397.

¹⁵ Edwards, 'Catalogue' unnumbered letter leaf in *Works Vol. 26* (forthcoming); emphasis mine.

¹⁶ Edwards, 'Things to be Considered an[d] Written fully about' [Long Series] entry 15 in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 231; emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Edwards, 'Things to be Considered an[d] Written fully about' [Long Series] entry 31 in *Works Vol. 6*, p. 236; emphasis mine.

The ‘History of the Work of Redemption’ was in like manner a demonstration of the harmony to be found in history as related to special revelation. This point, including the great contrast between Edwards’ harmonising of history with Scripture and the contemporary Enlightenment approach, was discussed extensively in the previous chapter. Here we simply recall that Edwards describes this project as one in which ‘...every divine doctrine, will appear to greatest advantage in the brightest light, in the most striking manner, showing the admirable contexture and *harmony* of the whole.’¹⁸

The ‘Harmony of the Old and New Testament’ material happens to have been the most complete of the three great works at the time of Edwards’ death, but has since been only of specialist interest and has remained unpublished.¹⁹ It is, however, apparently the project conceived latest in Edwards’ career, and its title most explicitly pronounces its purpose in terms of harmony: ‘I have also for my own profit and entertainment, done much towards another great work, which I call The Harmony of the Old and New Testament, in three parts.’²⁰ Another, fuller title was ‘The Harmony of the Genius, Spirit, Doctrines and Rules of the Old Testament and the New.’²¹ One need not belabour the point—‘The Harmony’ was to be a systematic demonstration of the harmony found in special revelation.

All three of Edwards’ unfinished great works thus sought to demonstrate the harmony resident within and among the media of revelation. The weight afforded by this evidence depends upon how representative these ‘great works’ are seen to be of Edwards’ entire life’s work. We would suggest that these projects actually represent rather closely Edwards’ ideal, and that his other work could be seen as smaller-scale manifestations, prefaces or annexes to these intended master works.²² If so, the entirety of Edwards’ theological output was in some way a demonstration of the harmony of all reality.

¹⁸ Edwards, ‘Letter to the Princeton Trustees’ in *Works Vol. 16*, p. 728; emphasis mine.

¹⁹ In the case of the present specialist, I confess I found the unpublished ‘Harmony’ material tedious.

²⁰ Edwards, ‘Letter to the Princeton Trustees’ in *Works Vol. 16*, p. 728.

²¹ See Minkema’s note on transcribed ‘Miscellany’ 1068.2 at the Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale.

²² Take for example *Freedom of the Will* and *Original Sin*, which would seem to have been major elements of the ‘Rational Account,’ yet by the time of their publication Edwards was no longer pursuing this project as a single work. Also, all the revival writings might well be seen to be in continuity with the larger ‘History of the Work of Redemption’ project.

IV. Edwards on Himself and His Vocation

We turn now to consider what Edwards said about himself and his work. Beyond Edwards' descriptions of his planned 'great works,' we do not have specific statements regarding any overall theological project of which these works were to be constituents. However, what Edwards does say concerning the ministerial office and the distinctive character of the regenerate experience suggests that our theory would be faithful to his self-understanding.

1. The Minister's Project

Edwards was many things, but he understood himself above all as a minister.²³ With the exception of a couple early years serving as a tutor at Yale and the few final months of his life presiding over The College of New Jersey (Princeton), Edwards spent his entire life as a minister. Moreover, Edwards was fairly forthcoming with his beliefs concerning the nature of the ministry. If we wish to advance a theory on Edwards' larger project, then attention must therefore be paid to his vocational self-understanding. The following discussion will suggest that Edwards' thoughts on the function of ministers within God's communicative work accords precisely with the theory we propose.

It might first be useful to locate Edwards within his Reformed tradition on this issue, taking Calvin as our point of reference. Calvin held a 'higher' doctrine of the ministry, in the sense of implying a significant functional distinction between the minister and his flock, than might be supposed:

For, as he did not commit his ancient people to angels, but raised up teachers on the earth to perform a truly *angelical* office....he [God] by an admirable test proves our obedience when we listen to his ministers just as we would to himself....he deigns to consecrate the mouths and tongues of men to his service, making his own voice to be heard in them....he in this (as we have said) uses the ministry of men, by making them, as it were his substitutes...²⁴

Calvin thought that God commits to men 'a truly angelical' office,' making 'his own voice to be heard' in those whom he makes 'as it were his substitutes.' Edwards'

²³ It is true that Edwards said 'So far as I myself am able to judge of what talents I have, for benefiting my fellow creatures by word, I think I can write better than I can speak.' Edwards, 'Letter to the Princeton Trustees' in *Works Vol 16*, p. 729. However, as we shall see, Edwards considered the work of writing polemic and apologetic theology to be part and parcel of the ministerial office.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* IV.i.5; IV.iii.1.

position on this issue has not drawn as much attention as it perhaps warrants, but he occupies a position very near Calvin if not marginally higher.²⁵

To wit, Edwards spoke as though he thought of ministers as in some respects a distinct order of intelligent being, closer to angels than to men with regard to their function in the work of redemption. ‘There are two kinds of persons that are given to Christ, and appointed and devoted of God to be his servants, to be employed with Christ, and under him, in his great work of the salvation of the souls of men; and they are *angels* and *ministers*.’²⁶ It is not just that ministers have an office that is comparable to that of angels; it is that they are altogether in the same category as ‘persons that are...to be employed with Christ’ in the work of redemption.’ Edwards even likens ministers in some ways to Christ himself: ‘The work of ministers is in many respects like the work that Christ himself was appointed to, as the Savior of men; and especially the same with the work which Christ does in his prophetic office.’²⁷ The similarity is not one of personal merit or ontological parity, but of prophetic function in communicating God’s revelation. In this vein, Edwards went as far as to say in another sermon that ‘...whereby as Christ himself is the author of eternal salvation, so ministers become a kind of subordinate saviors.’²⁸ That such language would occur to Edwards as appropriate suggests an understanding of the work of the ministry as a functional microcosm and integral component of God’s own work of communicating himself to humanity.

This very high view of the ministry is reflected in Edwards’ typology. Entry 53 of the ‘Types’ notebook is a prime example, and serves to explicate further Edwards’ thinking on the matter:

The different glory of the sun, moon and stars represents the different glory of Christ and the glorified saints. The sun represents Christ. The moon well represents the glory of the prophets and apostles and other ministers of Christ that have been improved as great lights of his church and instruments of promoting and establishing his kingdom and glory, and so have been luminaries to enlighten the world by

²⁵ Wilson H. Kimnach does note that Edwards places ‘...a new stress upon the heroic personal dimensions of ministers as true ambassadors of Christ.’ Kimnach, ‘Editor’s Introduction,’ in *Works Vol. 25*, pp. 14-15. See also Helen Petter Westra, “‘Above All Others’: Jonathan Edwards and the Gospel Ministry,” *American Presbyterians* 67 (1989), pp. 209-19.

²⁶ Edwards, ‘Christ the Example of Gospel Ministers’ in *Works Vol. 25*, p. 344, emphasis original.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 341.

²⁸ Edwards, ‘Sons of Oil, Heavenly Lights’ in *Works Vol. 25*, p. 271.

reflecting the light of the sun, that is, of Christ, and conveying his beams to them...²⁹

The entry begins by stating that the sun, moon and stars ‘represent the *different* glory of Christ and the glorified saints,’ a differentiation made not merely between Christ and the saints but also between kinds of saints. Christ stands alone as the sun, the source of all light. But ministers are, along with the prophets and apostles, likened typologically to the moon as ‘luminaries to enlighten the world by reflecting the light of the sun, that is, of Christ.’ Ministers have a different kind of glory than ordinary saints by virtue of being instruments to convey the light of divine revelation.

Also interesting is the *way* in which Edwards thinks ministers are used to accomplish God’s great work, which includes not only the proclamation of received truths but also the work of polemic and apologetic theology that increases the purity of revealed truth available to the church. ‘’Tis God’s design to make use of ministers thus: to correct the mistakes of his people and gradually introduce an increase of light.’³⁰ The work of these ‘divines’ has been to correct the church’s errors by engaging in polemic discourse—a task that Edwards was of course personally familiar with. This process has been at work over the history of doctrine, and will be the means of greater clarity in the eschatological future:

And this increase of light shall be very much by means of ministers; God will make use of his own institution and bless them in order to bring about this increase of light. ...he will make use of them at that day to clear divine truths and to refute errors, and to reclaim and correct God’s people wherein in any respect they have been mistaken and have been going out of the way of duty.³¹

In like manner, ministers engage in apologetics to forward God’s work. In his commentary on Revelation 16:21, Edwards depicts apologetic theology as God’s lethal instrument to destroy Satan: ‘For we know that Antichrist is to be destroyed by clear light, by the breath of Christ’s mouth, [by the] brightness of his coming, that is, by plain reason and demonstration, deduced from the Word of God.’³² Edwards has in mind the work of theologians like himself, who would bring to bear ‘invincible arguments’ against the enemy.³³ Thus when Edwards was refuting the errors of his

²⁹ Edwards, ‘Types’ entry 53, in *Works Vol. 11*, pp. 65-66.

³⁰ Edwards, ‘One End in God’s Appointing the Ministry’ in *Works Vol. 25*, pp. 445-446.

³¹ Edwards, ‘Christ the Example of Gospel Ministers’ in *Works Vol. 25*, p. 444

³² Edwards, ‘Exposition of the Apocalypse’ entry for Revelation 16:21 in *Works Vol. 5*, p. 118.

³³ ‘They shall be dreadfully confounded, by those invincible arguments that shall be used against them. They shall be full of unsettledness, of self-contradiction and contradiction on of another, and

day, he likely saw himself doing work that was of material contribution to the advent of the Kingdom no less than world missions and evangelism.³⁴

Edwards connects some of the dots for us between his theology of revelation and understanding of the role of ministers in a sermon entitled 'The Great Concern of a Watchman of Souls.' Ministers participate in God's programme of communicating himself in order to enable the people to fulfil their own purpose of re-emanating divine revelation:

He commits men's souls to ministers... that by their means they may answer their end in glorifying him. God has made all things for himself, he has created them for his glory; but more especially those creatures that he has endued with understanding; as he has done the souls of men. It is by them that God has his glory from all his creatures, as they are the eye of the creation to behold the glory of God manifested in the other creatures, and the mouth of the creation to praise him and ascribe to him the glory that is displayed in them. [...] God glorifies himself in his works that are manifest in the irrational and inanimate creation, in the view of his rational creatures that he has made capable of beholding and admiring them, and adoring, loving and praising him for them.³⁵

Human beings are created to observe intelligently all the streams of divine communication flowing from every aspect of created reality; they are the 'eye of the creation to behold the glory of God.' Moreover, it is given to them to re-emanate this knowledge actively as 'the mouth of the creation to praise him.' Noetic understanding is the foundation, but this should lead to the appropriate affectional response, so that they are 'capable of beholding and admiring them, and adoring, loving and praising him.'

Edwards thought that ministers were, as God's representatives, essential elements of his communicative project and the means by which people were enabled to achieve their purpose in existence. 'Ministers are his [God's] messengers, sent forth by him; and in their office and administrations among their people, represent

shall be exceedingly divided in their schemes and the answers they shall give to the arguments, which shall be brought against them, as men stumble and run one against another in the dark.' Edwards, 'Exposition of the Apocalypse' in *Works Vol. 5*, pp. 137-138.

³⁴ But this should not be taken to mean that ministers were able to do more than Edwards' supernaturalist epistemology would allow: 'From hence it necessarily follows, that the best and most able men in the world, with their greatest diligence and laboriousness, most eloquent speaking, clearest illustrations and convincing arguments, can do nothing towards the causing of knowledge of the things of the gospel; for the disposition, as we have shown, must necessarily be changed first.' Edwards, 'Miscellany' 123 in *Works Vol. 13*, p. 287.

³⁵ Edwards, 'The Great Concern of a Watchman for Souls' in *Works Vol. 25*, p. 66.

his person, stand in his stead, as those that are sent to declare his mind, to do his work, and to speak and act in his name.’³⁶ This representation often involves the work of interpretation, as in the case of sinners who ‘don’t understand God’s language, and they therefore need the help and advice of ministers under that conviction as interpreters for them.’³⁷ In wider terms, God is in fact ‘pleased to convey his light to men by means and instruments; and has sent forth his messengers, and appointed ministers in his church to be subordinate lights, and to shine with the communications of his light, and to reflect the beams of his glory on the souls of men.’³⁸ The ‘light’ that ministers convey to men is multi-dimensional divine communication, consisting of more than the merely notional.³⁹ Moreover, just as God is a communicative Being, so ‘ministers ought to be communicative of spiritual good.’⁴⁰ Ministers in this respect act very much as God himself acts, as they take part in the great work of communicating God to men.

Perhaps the most innovative of all of Edwards’ teachings on the nature of the ministerial calling, one that most clearly shows the great extent to which he envisioned his vocation as being set apart from the ordinary saints, is his belief that human ministers would have an ongoing role in heaven.⁴¹ Material on this theory is found both in his exegetical work and in the ‘Miscellanies’:

And the place of a servant or minister is at the door; and they will there be employed in promoting and ministering to the happiness of the saints, leading and conducting them to the fountains of knowledge and blessedness.... Gospel ministers sit at the gates as judges and as servants or doorkeepers who have the keys of the gates which Christ has given to them, whose office it is to bring in and admit persons into the church, and to conduct souls to heaven. And in the triumphant state of the church after the resurrection, they may still be represented as being at the gates in the same manner, as they may still be said to be the foundations.... And I believe that those who have [been] thus eminently instrumental of carrying the blessed work of the gospel in this world, will be employed in still assisting and promoting the

³⁶ Edwards, ‘A Farewell Sermon’ in *Works Vol. 25* p. 473.

³⁷ Edwards, ‘Blank Bible’ entry on Genesis 42:23 in *Works Vol. 24*, p. 191.

³⁸ Edwards, ‘True Excellency of a Minister of the Gospel’ in *Works Vol. 25*, p. 89.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 90.

⁴⁰ Edwards, ‘Sons of Oil, Heavenly Lights’ in *Works Vol. 25*, p. 267.

⁴¹ ‘...there will be no more need of the ministry of the Scriptures or of pastors, but each one will see God as he is face to face.’ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, translated by George Musgrave Giger, edited by James T. Dennison Jr. 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992. Turretin, *Institutes*), vol. 1 p. 59.

happiness of the saints in a glorified state, and so may as well as the angels be represented at the gates, introducing and conducting the inhabitants of the new earth to the pleasures of Jerusalem.⁴²

This passage virtually speaks for itself: ministers—or at least those that have been ‘eminently instrumental’ in the work of the gospel—will continue to serve in heaven in very much the same spiritual capacity as they did on earth. Edwards also gave voice to this rather unconventional teaching⁴³ in ‘Miscellany’ 681, where he writes ‘What has been said above confirms that some in heaven will be a kind of ministers in that society [of heaven]—teachers, ministers to their knowledge and love, and helpers of their joy, as ministers of the gospel are here.’⁴⁴ Notice that the wording used in Edwards’ depiction of the eschatological function of ministers exactly parallels Edwards’ multi-dimensional doctrine of revelation: it encompasses ‘knowledge and love’ as well as ‘joy.’ These things are what God communicates to the elect in his self-communication, and these things are also what ministers communicate on God’s behalf even in heaven.

We thus see how Edwards conceived of the ministerial task: to emulate and participate in God’s own project of imparting multi-dimensional divine communication to human beings. This task, which involved the work of polemics, apologetics and interpretation, enabled people to re-emanate revelation intelligently, and would carry on even in heaven as God’s appointed means of increasing the joy of his saints. This well-developed understanding of the minister’s work seems very much to recommend our theory that Edwards’ project was to interpret all reality as the harmonious revelation of the Triune God, so that people might better fulfil their purpose to apprehend and re-emanate this revelation.

2. The ‘Personal Narrative’

Finally, a theory on Edwards’ larger project ought to have something to say about Edwards’ ‘Personal Narrative.’ It has been suggested that ‘Edwards edited his own experience to fit his prescription of the model saint’ so that Edwards was describing what *ought* to have happened in the life of an ideal saint rather than necessarily what did happen.⁴⁵ It should be said, however, that the ‘Narrative’ is no

⁴² Edwards, ‘Exposition of the Apocalypse’ entry for Revelation 21:12 in *Works Vol. 5*, pp. 154-155.

⁴³ Edwards at least believed this teaching to be novel enough to require the qualification ‘I believe’—a phrase that is actually rather uncommon in the corpus—in his defence of the idea. See *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Edwards, ‘Miscellany’ 681 in *Works Vol. 18*, p. 243.

⁴⁵ George S. Claghorn, introduction to the ‘Personal Narrative’ in *Works Vol. 16*, p. 748.

work of fiction.⁴⁶ If the revival writings and the *Diary of David Brainerd* are guides, Edwards was factually accurate in the specific matters he reported, even if he was also capable of leaving out things he considered extraneous or distracting from the point he wished to make. However, nor was the 'Narrative' a casual reminiscence haphazardly included in a private communication. It rather shows every sign of careful composition and expectation of readership beyond his immediate correspondent. There is thus little doubt that the 'Narrative' offers a glimpse into what Edwards thought true religion ought to look like, and it is therefore of great value to the present task. We understand the 'Personal Narrative' to be a kind of paradigm that describes someone for whom Edwards' project worked, one for whom all the media of revelation were harmoniously being appropriated and the regenerate soul re-emanating this divine communication intelligently and joyfully. In other words, the 'Narrative' provides confirmation for the end goal we propose for Edwards' larger project.

Consider the aspects of his experience that Edwards chooses for inclusion into the 'Narrative.' First of all, he records the *disharmony* that previously registered in his mind between the teaching of Scripture on divine sovereignty and his own sense of human reason:

From my childhood up, my mind had been wont to be full of objections against the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in choosing whom he would to eternal life, and rejecting whom he pleased; leaving them eternally to perish, and be everlastingly tormented in hell. It used to appear like a horrible doctrine to me.⁴⁷

Perhaps Edwards could identify at some level with the Deists and Arminians he locked horns with on the sovereignty of God, since he at one point experienced a similar distaste for it. Thanks to the work of God, however, this doctrine later became perfectly reconciled to Edwards' reason: '[T]here has been a wonderful alteration in my mind, with respect to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, from that day to this; so that I scarce ever have found so much as the rising of an objection against God's sovereignty.'⁴⁸ Keeping in mind the importance of the non-noetic components of Trinitarian communication, we see that the rational reconciliation was accompanied by the appropriate response: 'I have often since, not only had a

⁴⁶ Perry Miller's assessment of the 'Personal Narrative' was that '...it cannot be taken as an altogether factual record of his earliest years.' Miller, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 39.

⁴⁷ Edwards, 'Personal Narrative' in *Works Vol. 16*, pp. 791-792.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 792.

conviction, but a *delightful* conviction. The doctrine of God's sovereignty has very often appeared, an exceeding pleasant, bright and sweet doctrine to me: and absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God.⁴⁹ So for Edwards, the paradigmatic spiritual state involves an apprehension of the harmony between scriptural theology and human reason, a harmony that includes affectional and beatific as well as noetic dimensions. This is precisely the harmony between reason and scriptural theology Edwards was seeking to display in his work, particularly in the 'Rational Account' project and its published offshoots.

Another item Edwards includes in the 'Narrative' is the dramatic shift in his attitude towards thunderstorms.

I used to be a person uncommonly terrified with thunder: and it used to strike me with terror, when I saw a thunderstorm rising. But now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God at the first appearance of a thunderstorm. And used to take the opportunity at such times, to fix myself to view the clouds, and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder: which often times was exceeding entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God.⁵⁰

Here the emphasis is on the appropriate affectional response to natural revelation that the saint enjoys. The basic sensory input is the same, but the supernaturally regenerate heart is able to appreciate the beauty where it was previously insensible or perceived dissonance. This is very much the point of so much of Edwards' scientific writings—many of which were intended for inclusion in the 'Rational Account'—which seek to incite our wondrous contemplation of the 'great and glorious God' more than simply to increase our knowledge of the natural world.

Edwards then describes his response to another medium of God's communication, the Scriptures.

I had then, and at other times, the greatest delight in the holy Scriptures, of any book whatsoever. Oftentimes in reading it, every word seemed to touch my heart. I felt an harmony between something in my heart, and those sweet and powerful words. I seemed often to see so much light, exhibited by every sentence, and such refreshing ravishing food communicated, that I could not get along in reading. Used oftentimes to dwell long on one sentence, to see the wonders

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 794.

contained in it; and yet almost every sentence seemed to be full of wonders.⁵¹

Notice the words ‘I felt an *harmony* between something in my heart, and those sweet and powerful words.’ Notice also how Edwards described the communicative nature of the Scriptures, in that he saw ‘such refreshing ravishing food communicated...’ in the fresh knowledge of God it contained. Regenerate minds experience a very different response to special revelation than the dissonance insisted upon by the Deists.

Finally, we notice that Edwards narrates how history and current events became part of his joyful apprehension of the harmony of reality. ‘The histories of the past advancement of Christ’s kingdom, have been sweet to me. When I have read histories of past ages, the pleasantest thought in all my reading has been, to read of the kingdom of Christ being promoted.’⁵² One can see why Edwards would have been so enthusiastic about his ‘History of the Work of Redemption’ project. Since the pages of history have become such fuel for Edwards’ joy, it is natural that he would want to assist others to join in this delightful appropriation of God’s revelation. But there is perhaps an even brighter note sounded when Edwards talks about his attitude toward current events:

I had great longings for the advancement of Christ’s kingdom in the world. My secret prayer used to be in great part taken up in praying for it. If I heard the least hint of anything that happened in any part of the world, that appeared to me, in some respect of other, to have a favorable aspect on the interest of Christ’s kingdom, my soul eagerly caught at it; and it would much animate and refresh me. I used to be earnest to read public news-letters, mainly for that end; to see if I could not find some news favorable to the interests of religion in the world.⁵³

Edwards’ reception of God’s communicative project in redemptive history was not limited to the past. Rather, he turned his eager eye to the events of his own day to detect how Christ was advancing his kingdom, an activity he was convinced the saints in heaven were likewise engaged in. And of course, the information gained in this activity became grist for affectional appropriation.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 797.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 800.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 797.

For the regenerate, all things are in delightful harmony. Doctrines so repugnant to natural reason such as divine sovereignty seem gloriously true. Dramatic natural phenomena like thunderstorms become a welcome reminder of God's majestic power. History is trawled to discover the details of God's redemptive work. The Scriptures make perfect sense, and are read with great pleasure. Edwards' project, as we propose it, was to participate in God's work of communicating himself to intelligent beings by harmonising all the media of revelation so that men might better re-emanate it. The 'Personal Narrative' was Edwards' paradigm of individual success in this project. All aspects of divine revelation were in perfect harmony as he took delight in his observations. There was knowledge, love and joy; in sum, he was fulfilling his teleological purpose by actively re-emanating divine communication. Thus Edwards' life-long work was to help others enter into this condition by pointing out the beautiful harmony he saw in reality.

V. This Theory in Relation to Others

We come now to briefly discuss this theory in relation to some of the existing large-scale perspectives on Edwards. In a manner something like the process of 'bracketing' in field artillery practise, in which the first shell might fall well short, the second long, and thereafter increasingly close to the target, the descriptions of Edwards produced by scholars have been gradually converging. The best way to land the next volley even closer is to make corrections taking into account previous efforts as well as the target itself. Likewise, although our main focus has been on the primary source material, our study has benefited from the increasingly accurate rendering the secondary literature provides. This theory on Edwards' work is therefore presented as useful in relation to others, not so much that it is more successful in absolute terms, but rather that it in many cases adds another stratum of explanation to their insights.

For a rather straightforward example of this function, we refer to a very recent perspective that lands in territory nearby our own. E. Brooks Holifield argues in the *Cambridge Companion* that 'Edwards's attraction to the theme of 'excellency' reflected an angle of vision that found expression in almost everything he wrote.'⁵⁴ 'Excellency' is of course a term closely related to 'harmony' in Edwards, and we

⁵⁴ E. Brooks Holifield, 'Edwards as Theologian' in Stephen J. Stein, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 145.

could only concur that these interrelated themes indeed pervade the corpus. Moreover, Holifield goes on to say things like ‘Edwards attempted to discern patterns of harmony in divine activity, ‘fit’ congruities among doctrines, correspondences within the diverse books of Scripture, and symmetries between the natural and the supernatural.’⁵⁵ As to *why* this harmonising activity should be so ubiquitous in such a wide spectrum of contexts, Holifield only hints at. Our theory says that it is because Edwards believed that pointing out the divine hallmark of harmony available in all the media of revelation was fundamental to his task of forwarding God’s self-communication to intelligent beings.

Another example comes with reference to Michael J. McClymond’s *Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards*.⁵⁶ McClymond very rightly seeks to uncover the connections across Edwards’ corpus, and comes away with insight into Edwards’ core theology.⁵⁷ Similar to the way in which our study discusses a key doctrine—revelation—and makes a closely linked statement about Edwards’ larger project in light of it—interpretive harmonisation—McClymond focuses on the interrelated issues of spiritual perception and apologetics. Perhaps, however, the perspective we have presented can provide a higher-level understanding of these themes. The theme of spiritual perception could be seen simply as an important implication of Edwards’ multi-dimensional doctrine of revelation, in which the crucial affectional dimension of revelation demands a highly developed understanding of, and emphasis upon, spiritual perception.⁵⁸ Only in regenerate minds enabled to apprehend divine beauty could God’s project of self-communication to intelligent beings be consummated, and Edwards needed to focus on this subject. On the other hand, apologetics could be understood as Edwards’ great project of demonstrating the harmony to be found in all reality, *with specific respect to unbelievers*.⁵⁹ Edwards was as concerned with interpreting the media of revelation for the sake of those who were already regenerate as for those who were

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 159.

⁵⁶ Michael J. McClymond, *Encounters with God: An Approach to the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.)

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. v.

⁵⁸ The other two main implications would be an emphasis on the dissemination of knowledge and the use of reason with regard to the noetic dimension, and an emphasis on sanctification and holiness with regard to the ontological dimension.

⁵⁹ A similar observation could be made with reference to Stephen J. Nichols’ explanation of Edwards in terms of apologetics expressed in *An Absolute Sort of Certainty: The Holy Spirit and the Apologetics of Jonathan Edwards* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003).

not—all were alike designed to actively re-emanate revelation as the ‘mouth of the creation.’⁶⁰ Our theory would therefore include preaching and polemic theology along with apologetics among the various ways in which Edwards carried out his single work of interpretive harmonisation.⁶¹

An earlier study that also deals with some similar territory is Roland A. Delattre’s 1968 *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics*.⁶² Delattre’s thesis is that ‘...the aesthetic aspect of Jonathan Edwards’ thought and vision, which finds its definitive formulation in his concepts of beauty and sensibility, provides a larger purchase upon the essential and distinctive features of his thought than does any other aspect.’⁶³ He insists that if we want to understand Edwards’ vision, ‘...we must dare to take seriously his frequent suggestion that beauty is the central clue to the nature of reality.’⁶⁴ Again, it is important to recognize that ‘beauty’ is interrelated and functionally synonymous with ‘harmony’ in Edwards, so we are not quibbling about terminology.⁶⁵ We concur that this aesthetic concept, call it what you wish, is indeed the distinctive feature of Edwards’ work.⁶⁶ What the present study adds is that it explains what Edwards was attempting to *do* with it. As a good minister sent to reflect the light of the Son, he was pointing out harmony to assist intelligent beings in fulfilling their purposes and to forward God’s purpose in creating them.

Stephen R. Holmes’ *God of Grace and God of Glory* is in many ways the nearest volley to our own.⁶⁷ Both accounts take Edwards’ attempts at understanding the meaning of God’s self-enlargement in creation as the basic foundation to

⁶⁰ Edwards, ‘The Great Concern of a Watchman for Souls’ in *Works Vol. 25*, p. 66.

⁶¹ I readily concede that Edwards’ Enlightenment context made the apologetic piece more prominent, and that his ostensibly apologetic literature was perhaps done with believers in mind, to better equip Christian minds so endangered by the pernicious intellectual currents of his day.

⁶² Roland A. Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968).

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. vii.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1.

⁶⁵ See Edwards, *Works Vol. 6*, p. 305.

⁶⁶ We would, however, agree with William J. Danaher’s point that Edwards’s doctrine of the Trinity was the foundation for his aesthetics and ethics, and not the other way around as Delattre suggests. See Danaher, *The Trinitarian Ethics of Jonathan Edwards* (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 4.

⁶⁷ Stephen R. Holmes, *God of Grace and God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

understanding his distinctive theology.⁶⁸ Holmes would emphasize the aspect of ‘glory’ whereas we would emphasise ‘communicativeness’, but these are two sides of one coin reflective of the different doctrinal foci—theology proper and revelation, respectively—of these studies. Holmes notices how Edwards sought to incorporate all the disciplines of learning into his account and to use typology as a means of ‘finding meaning and coherence’ in nature and history.⁶⁹ Our theory would just add that this and other aspects of Edwards’ work were specifically about the demonstration of Trinitarian harmony. However, the primary additional layer of interpretation that our theory offers would again be to state the purpose to which Edwards put the distinctive insights that Holmes identifies.

VI. Conclusion

It is hoped that the perspective presented in this study may prove useful in understanding Edwards and his complex corpus. Moreover, it is hoped that the project proposed as his might yet have some potential for fruitful appropriation in the church today. Edwards was responding to the corrosive philosophical currents of the Enlightenment, particularly ascendant English Deism. As we noted, the Deists argued that there was no harmony between reason and the claims of revelation, no harmony between Scripture and history, no harmony between the Old Testament and the New, and certainly no harmony among the supposed persons of the monstrous Trinity. Their vision of reality was thus as ugly as it was mistaken. Edwards had a radically opposite vision, a belief in the beautiful harmony of the whole cosmos. God is harmonious in himself as Trinity. He communicates his harmony through revelation, and that revelation is absolutely harmonious. The wonderful perception of this harmony led Edwards to the ecstasy he described in the ‘Personal Narrative,’ and he wished to bring others with him into this state eternally. All of this was in utter defiance of the Enlightenment project.

What remains is to consider how this Enlightenment project has lived on to define the contemporary situation, so that even now we are living in an intellectual environment approximating the one Spinoza advocated in clandestine publications three and a half centuries ago.⁷⁰ Given this, one wonders if there are today those who

⁶⁸ See *ibid*, chapter 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 12-14; p. 100.

⁷⁰ See Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of the Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001; reprint, 2002).

could benefit from the perspective that Edwards brought to his context. Perhaps even now there are pastors and theologians who might be attracted to the project of interpreting the harmony of reality and helping people joyfully re-emanate God's revelation. If so, they would do well to emulate the faithful zeal and creative power Edwards brought to this unimaginably expansive task.

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